



Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: 2025-03-22 | accepted: 2025-03-24 | published: 2025-03-26

The Journey to Female Recognition in Martial Arts

The journey towards female recognition in martial arts

Larissa de Freitas Coutinho Oliveira

Summary

This article analyzes the path taken to consolidate women's participation in martial arts, focusing on MMA and Muay Thai, through a review of academic literature and institutional documents. The article examines the relationship between historical events, cultural dynamics, and equity policies, highlighting how the female presence in these sports challenges gender norms and transforms the competitive landscape. It argues that the recognition of women's sports depends on the correlation between three structuring axes: (i) symbolic and competitive references that generate a demonstrative effect; (ii) training networks and technical infrastructure that support permanence; and (iii) media strategies that increase visibility and reposition narratives. Therefore, practical recommendations are presented for sports governance, specialized media, and training programs for female leaders.

Keywords: martial arts; gender; MMA; femininity; sports governance; media; equity policies.

Abstract

This article analyzes the path taken to consolidate women's participation in martial arts, focusing on MMA and Muay Thai, through a review of academic literature and institutional documents. The article examines the relationship between historical events, cultural dynamics, and equity policies, highlighting how the female presence in these sports challenges gender norms and transforms the competitive landscape. It argues that the recognition of women's sports depends on the correlation between three structuring axes: (i) symbolic and competitive references that generate a demonstrative effect; (ii) training networks and technical infrastructure that support permanence; and (iii) media strategies that increase visibility and reposition narratives. Therefore, practical recommendations are presented for sports governance, specialized media, and training programs for female leaders.

Keywords: martial arts; gender; MMA; femininity; sports governance; average; equity policies.

Introduction

The presence of women in martial arts has grown significantly in the last twenty years, highly motivated by institutional milestones (such as the creation of women's divisions in large MMA promotions) and by sociocultural transformations that disconnect the historical association between combativeness and masculinity. Globally, the entry and consolidation of categories women in high-impact organizations — with media attention and pay-per-view cycles, were decisive factors in expanding the audience and redefining expectations of technical performance. A milestone common in literature and recent memory is the institutionalization of the women's bantamweight category and the centrality of athletes like Ronda Rousey in the 2010s, which influenced the legitimacy of women's MMA in the main schedule of elite events.

However, studies show that women's experiences in martial arts are permeated by gender stereotypes, by expectations of “proper femininity” and by asymmetries in

Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: 2025-03-22 | accepted: 2025-03-24 | published: 2025-03-26

coverage and sponsorship, which still tend to favor men. Recent literature shows how evidence, however, a reconfiguration: the practice of “hard sports” by women challenges norms and expands identity repertoires, with positive results on self-confidence, support networks and professional opportunities in sports.

2. Methodology

A narrative review was carried out with an exploratory search for sources (2010–2025) in databases and academic repositories (SciELO, Redalyc, Journal Portals, institutional repositories), websites official documents and reports from sports organizations. The following are considered: (i) empirical studies and reviews on gender and martial arts; (ii) documents and historical pages of promoters/organizations (for chronological milestones); (iii) reports from international organizations on equity in sport; and (iv) literature on media and sponsorship. A narrative review was chosen primarily because there is diversity of approaches (sociology of sport, communication, public policies) and by need for critical synthesis.

3. Historical and institutional milestones

The public validation of women's MMA culminates in a sequence of symbolic milestones and structural: the creation of women's divisions in major promotions, the inclusion of women's fights in main cards, inaugural titles with wide visibility and official recognitions such as insertion in the Hall of Fame. Between 2012 and 2015, Rousey's figure was a factor of great acceleration, with an impact on multiple fronts: protagonism in pay-per-view events, finishing records in the first round and unprecedented centrality in the organization's narrative. Rousey became a media and market, enabling subsequent cycles of champions with strong technical appeal and narrative — like Amanda Nunes, Holly Holm, Cris Cyborg and Valentina Shevchenko — who helped to consolidate public interest and the permanence of women's categories in MMA elite.

This legitimacy, however, is not limited to the octagon. It also involves the recognition institutional and regulatory. In the Olympic and federative field, reports recently released by International Olympic Committee (IOC) demonstrate that gender equality goals in participation, governance and arbitration, have undergone great advances, concluding a growing attention to equity as a governance criterion. Although MMA is not part of the Olympics, these guidelines have been used as measures for martial arts confederations and leagues,



Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: 2025-03-22 | accepted: 2025-03-24 | published: 2025-03-26

including modalities such as Muay Thai, jiu-jitsu and wrestling, which share structures similar sports management.

Symbolic recognition — such as the inclusion of women in the Sports Hall of Fame UFC — acts as a retroactive validation of individual trajectories, but also as a tool pedagogical framework for future generations of athletes. Regulatory frameworks create the conditions institutional for the sustainability of women's sport: by establishing minimum criteria for participation, monitoring and transparency, feed a cycle of participation and visibility.

As already mentioned, the expansion did not occur in a linear fashion. In addition to the peak of visibility, were aspects such as training infrastructure, competition calendar, networks gyms and the training of trainers who transformed attention into permanence. In studies in this case, periods of high viewership were followed by an increase in entry and retention when there were local programs, well-defined competitive trajectories and basic institutional support, such as scholarships, mentoring, and access to training facilities. This combination provides an explanation for continuity after peaks and distinguishes contexts in which progress was only occasional of those in which it has established itself in a solid manner.

4. Femininity, stereotypes and the politics of bodies

The inclusion of women in martial arts brings intensity to a historical tension between corporalities considered “feminine” and the combative nature traditionally attributed to male. Far from being resolved, this tension is constantly negotiated in training, in competitions and how athletes are perceived by coaches, the media, and the public. Studies point out that female practitioners face a dichotomy: on the one hand, they need demonstrate technical competence and aggressiveness compatible with high performance; on the other hand, it is necessary to maintain signs of respectability and conventional femininity, under penalty of marginalization symbolic.

These negotiations are not simply aesthetic, but demonstrate that there are still embedded and institutionalized gender norms. The literature in sociology of sport contrasts that such norms act as a sieve of belonging, determining who can be recognized as a legitimate athlete in spaces historically dominated by men. Performances of femininity — makeup, costumes, ways of expressing oneself — can be effective both as visibility and acceptance strategies in stereotyped markets, as well as constraints that limit the revolutionary potential of women in the ring.



Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: 2025-03-22 | accepted: 2025-03-24 | published: 2025-03-26

Furthermore, recent literature demonstrates subjective outcomes of these disputes: feelings of inadequacy, bodily self-policing, and the need for constant justification of presence. However, there is also a counter-hegemonic potential. As Channon and Phipps observe, (2017), continuous training in modalities such as Muay Thai and jiu-jitsu can produce new forms of vision, redefining what is acceptable or admirable in the female athletic body. These practices result in small transformations in gender repertoires, which extend the sporting space and echo in the construction of more plural social identities.

Finally, research conducted in the Brazilian context describes training environments ambivalent: while they allow women to enter, they still operate under codes of tacit exclusion and delegitimization, such as not being invited to sparring (training that simulates a fight real), technical discredit or limited access to leadership positions. Such challenges, often invisible, reinforce that initiatives that not only expand access, but guarantee conditions of symbolic and institutional permanence, are of extreme importance, taking as an example the visibility of role models, technical support networks, critical training of coaches and practices of gender-sensitive pedagogical practices.

5. Media, marketing and the recognition economy

The consolidation of recognition of athletes in combat sports is mediated by symbolic and economic structures that operate through the media and the market. The literature on sports communication has shown that journalistic and advertising coverage of women in sport is still characterized by striking asymmetries — both in volume and focus (Scheidler & Wagener, 2017). Instead of technical performance, priority is often given to aspects of appearance, personal life or conformity to hegemonic standards of femininity. This selective framing not only reduces the sports protagonism of female athletes, how it negatively influences its commercial value, restricting sponsorship opportunities and contracts.

The problem is not limited to the lack of visibility, but to its quality and social function. Comparative studies indicate that the way athletes are presented has a direct impact on their public attitudes and the symbolic legitimization of its modalities (Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013). When the media narrative emphasizes performance data, competitive context and trajectory in sports, there is greater engagement, less cultural resistance and an increase in the propensity to purchase of tickets, related products and services — especially among uninitiated audiences in women's sports (The Sport Journal, 2018).



Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: 2025-03-22 | accepted: 2025-03-24 | published: 2025-03-26

In the field of sports marketing, recent analyses show that the contractual structure still systematically favors male athletes, with marked differences in values, frequency of campaigns and promoted product categories (Fink, 2015). Many brands replicate gender stereotypes — associating women's sports with niches such as “overcoming” or “delicacy” — and fail to explore technical, historical, and competitive narratives that could reposition the athletes as protagonists of high performance. This approach not only limits the reach of campaigns, how it contributes to the naturalization of inequality.

On the other hand, successful experiences point to paths for innovation. Campaigns based on performance storytelling and historical milestones — which articulate sporting trajectories, statistics and representation — have shown effectiveness in expanding the fan base and generating conversions relevant commercial initiatives (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). These initiatives demonstrate that the appreciation symbolic and economic aspects of athletes is not a given, but a field in dispute, the outcome of which depends of editorial choices, marketing strategies and institutional investment.

6. The Brazilian case in perspective

The growth of martial arts among women in Latin America reveals a rapprochement between vectors seen beyond just one nation — such as the circulation of events, techniques and idols — and local settings permeated by structural inequalities and unequal access to sport. In Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, research shows that the increase in the practice of modalities such as MMA, boxing and taekwondo among women have happened together and parallel to the growth of multi-style gyms, social inclusion projects and support networks community. Still, this growth has been more noticeable at the ends, among female students and athletes, than in the decision-making and technical-administrative spheres.

Studies indicate that existing barriers to achieving gender equity in sport Latin American are not limited to entry, but are enhanced as one advances in the organizational hierarchy: women remain underrepresented in leadership and arbitration positions and technical management, even in modalities with a significant female base. The literature shows that A set of combined factors result in this gap, not a lack of interest or qualification. These factors: informal networks of exclusion, naturalization of male authority and absence of specific training policies for female leaders.

In this scenario, initiatives aimed at training coaches, including girls in sports initiation and the creation of intersectoral partnerships with schools and universities have proven to be promising. Such strategies not only expand the practitioner base, but also create a pipeline of



Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: 2025-03-22 | accepted: 2025-03-24 | published: 2025-03-26

more diverse and capable sports leaders. Empirical evidence suggests that programs with focus on technical development, sports pedagogy and inclusive management have a greater chance of generating systemic and lasting impact.

Furthermore, well-documented experiences of social projects in Brazil — such as “Luta for Peace” and initiatives linked to educational sport — reinforce that the provision of environments insurance, adapted methodologies and female technical references are structuring conditions for the retention of women and girls in combat sports. These practices favor the reversal of cycle of exclusion and promote more equitable sporting trajectories, especially in territories vulnerable, where sport also fulfills a social function.

7. Competitive references and training networks: why do they matter?

The path of consolidation of women in martial arts cannot be understood only by landmarks of visibility or individual achievements. The international literature in sociology of sport highlights that the sustainable development of women's sports depends on the set integrated between symbolic capital and technical infrastructure — that is, between the public valorization of competitive references and the existence of training to qualify new practitioners and transfer knowledge.

High performance references, such as world titles, participation in events prestige or inclusion in halls of fame, act as demonstrative effects, by pointing out that the highlight professional is possible in women's sport, through the demonstration of professional trajectories, and directly influence the decision of whether young athletes will enter or remain. However, this stimulus only results in structural progress when guaranteed in technical and pedagogical support systems and institutional — such as academies with qualified teams, certification and exchange programs technical, access to scholarships and career plans.

Following this view, the literature demonstrates that the sustained growth of modalities women's sports requires a solid base of installed capacity: coaches, referees, physiologists, physical trainers, sports managers, and promoters. This infrastructure, in addition to ensuring continuity, culminates in the establishment of an ecosystem of belonging and technical legitimacy for women in combat sports, causing a break with the logic of "media peaks" and avoiding the dropout from the women's categories after cycles of individual stardom.

Furthermore, the presence of inter-institutional networks is essential — connecting academies, federations, universities, and grassroots programs—as it strengthens the sports pipeline. Such networks function as zones for the transfer of technical and normative knowledge, culminating in



Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: 2025-03-22 | accepted: 2025-03-24 | published: 2025-03-26

standardization of good training practices, promoting diversity of profiles and expanding access to opportunities at different stages of the athletic trajectory. In contexts marked by divergences of gender and resources, like the Brazilian one, this integration between elite and base becomes even more essential to ensure that the symbolic advancement of women in sport translates into structural transformation.

8. The role of institutional policies

The institutionalization of gender goals and indicators has been consolidated as an axis central to international sports governance agendas. Documents produced by the Committee International Olympic Committee (IOC) and global federations such as World Athletics and FIBA, establish metrics for gender equality in participation, leadership and refereeing, with deadlines defined, evaluation mechanisms and three-year action plans. These guidelines serve as accountability mechanisms that link organizational performance to commitments to equity, in addition to establishing good practices.

Although MMA is not part of the Olympic program, its promoting entities — such as mixed martial arts confederations, leagues and federations — can benefit from the adoption voluntary of these parameters, especially with regard to female leadership and composition technique. The literature on sports policies points out that the presence of women in decision-making positions is not just a question of symbolic representation, but a determining factor for the redesign of priorities, pedagogical methods and evaluation criteria.

Experiences in sports such as athletics, rugby and judo show that plans multi-year plans with clear and measurable goals significantly increase female participation in strategic functions, especially when accompanied by specific training, incentive financial and monitoring mechanisms. These conclusions reinforce that change requires intentional planning, inter-institutional coordination and public commitment to goals progressive inclusion, not being purely spontaneous.

In the case of martial arts, the integration of institutional performance indicators with gender bias — such as the proportion of female coaches, referees and managers — can accelerate the transition from specific inclusion cycles to an organizational culture, aiming for equity. Such standards function as thermometers, and more than that, as management tools, capable of guide budget decisions, funding criteria, and communication strategies. In an area historically masculinized, like MMA, investment in gender-focused leadership is key condition for consolidating female trajectories and democratizing access to positions of influence.



9. Final considerations: between visibility, structure and systemic equity

The trajectory of consolidation of women in martial arts shows that recognition sport is more than just individual athletic performance, but depends on an architecture broad range of cultural legitimacy, media visibility, and institutional structure. This article demonstrated that the rise of MMA, Muay Thai and other combat sports practiced by women cannot be explained by isolated milestones, but by the integration of three interdependent dimensions: culture and symbols, media and market, and structuring and governance policies.

Analyzing from a symbolic perspective, the presence of women in spaces historically masculinized as the ring or the octagon represents an act of reconfiguring gender boundaries. Women's athletic performances not only transcend gender norms, femininity, but also generate new bodily and identity grammars, enabling plural subjectivities and alternative models of being an athlete.

In the media and marketing sphere, literature shows that frameworks based on in technique, in the competitive context and in historical landmarks contribute to public legitimacy and economics of women's sports. The media is an active agent in educating the social outlook, influencing sponsorship, public policies, and cultural practices. Storytelling strategies based on in performance enhance audience expansion, reduce resistance and generate engagement with symbolic and commercial value.

At the structural level, the data indicate that, for there to be strong and fair growth, it is necessary to robust training networks and institutionalized equity goals are necessary. Experiences International studies show that multi-year plans with gender indicators are effective in expanding the participation of women in technical committees, referees, and leadership positions. These strategies are even more necessary in contexts such as Latin America, where inequalities of gender correlate with socioeconomic and institutional asymmetries.

Thus, the recommendations arising from this analysis are not limited to quantitative expansion of female participation, but aim to build a sustainable, safe and plural ecosystem. To achieve this, the following measures are necessary: defining annual targets for female presence in technical and decision-making positions; strengthening training networks, including training programs certification and mentoring; restructuring of media narratives with a focus on performance and trajectory; and creation of impact indicators in academia, social organizations, and federations. In this way, leadership inclusive must be understood as a strategic factor of structural transformation and redistribution of power in the field of sports projects.



Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: 2025-03-22 | accepted: 2025-03-24 | published: 2025-03-26

Regarding the future agenda, it is important to carry out longitudinal empirical studies that analyze the dynamics of visibility and permanence, comparing Olympic and non-Olympic modalities Olympics. Furthermore, research is needed to evaluate the impacts of various policies training female leaders in athlete retention over time. Furthermore, it is essential produce data disaggregated by gender, function and competitive level to inform policies public and monitor institutional progress.

In short, female recognition in martial arts goes beyond symbolic milestones: demands infrastructure, fair governance, and a more comprehensive sports vision. Only in this way we can transform the visibility cycle into legacy, establishing a competitive environment that is technical, plural and structurally fair.

References

HANNON, A.; PHIPPS, C. *Pink gloves still give black eyes: Exploring 'alternative' femininity in women's combat sports. Martial Arts Studies*, vol. 3, p. 24–37, 2017. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18573/mas.30>.

CLARINGBOULD, IEC; KNOPPERS, AE *Doing and undoing gender in sport governance. Sex Roles*, vol. 58, n. 1–2, p. 81–92, 2008.

FINK, JS *Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: Have we really "come a long way, baby"?* *Sport Management Review*, vol. 18, no. 3, p. 331–342, 2015. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.05.001>.

GREEN, M. *Integrating macro- and meso-level approaches: A comparative analysis of elite sport development in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. European Sport Management Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 143–165, 2005. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184740500188805>.

HENRY, I.; ROBINSON, L. *Gender equality and leadership in Olympic bodies*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2010.

LEBEL, K.; DANYLCHUK, K. *How Tweet it is: A gendered analysis of professional tennis players' self-presentation on Twitter. International Journal of Sport Communication*, vol. 5, no. 4, p. 461–480, 2012.

RASMUSSEN, K.; DUFUR, MJ; COPE, MR; PIERCE, H. *Gender marginalization in sports participation through advertising: The case of Nike. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 18, no. 15, p. 759, 2021. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18157759>.

SCHEADLER, T.; WAGSTAFF, A. *Exposure to women's sports: Changing attitudes toward female athletes. The Sport Journal*, vol. 19, no. 1, p. 1–17, 2018.



Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: 2025-03-22 | accepted: 2025-03-24 | published: 2025-03-26

SISJORD, MK; KRISTIANSEN, E. *Elite women wrestlers' muscles: Physical strength and a social burden. International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 44, no. 2–3, p. 231–246, 2009.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690209335278>

TRUYENS, J.; DE BOSSCHER, V.; HEYNDELS, B.; WESTERBEEK, H. *A resource-based perspective on countries' competitive advantage in elite athletics. International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, vol. 6, no. 3, p. 459–489, 2014.