

Women Practicing Karate: Tale of Social Acceptance

'Karate', the very idea of it makes us envisage of something or someone powerful, confident, and invincible. We form respect or awe towards a person hearing him/her practicing karate. However, learning karate by girls or women is not accepted in our society as it should be. Moreover, women's skill in martial arts is also less acknowledged than men's in our prevailing society.

Karate has made its appearance in Tokyo Olympics 2020 for the very first time. Serbia's Jovana Prekovic defeated China's Yin Xiaoyan to win the gold medal in the women's karate "kumite" -61kg category, making remarkable history for karate.

We can be sure that every athlete has to face numerous barriers in continuing their journeys. However, women athletes have to encounter much more inconvenience, barriers and censure socially compared to men. If we try to brood on the reasons that why women have to endure immense social pressure against practicing karate, the answer will lie in the perception of people of the masculine culture.

Karateist Marzan Akter Priya and Humaira Akhter Antara are two names written in history of Bangladesh with pride and glory. Female karateists have to overcome not only personal physical barriers, but also inconspicuous social pressure to bring this glory.

Marzan Akter Priya won gold medal for Bangladesh in women's -55kg kumite (fight) event beating Pakistani karateist Kouser Sana by 4-3 points in the 13th South Asian Games in Kathmandu in 2019.

Marzan's success was followed by Humaira, who also earned gold medal in karate after beating Nepal's Anu Gurung by 5-2 points in the final of the women's -61kg kumite event in the 13th Asian Games.

According to Humaira, it is important to learn karate for both boys and girls. She wants all women to move freely at day and night. She is also vocal about the need of government policy to establish martial arts as school curriculum.

There are different styles of Karate. Some of the most popular or best known include Goju-Ryu, Kyokushin, Shito-Ryu, Shorin-Ryu, Shotokan and Wado-Ryu. Karate is originated in Japan. In Bangladesh, there are several institutions which teach karate for both men and women.

Dhaka University Judo & Karate Centre, Mirpur Indoor Stadium, Bangladesh Kyokushin in Kalabagan (branch of International Kyokushin Organisation), Uttara Karate-do Dojo are well-known karate institutions in Bangladesh.

In masculine society like ours, women are not defined by their sex rather they are defined by and expected to coincide with their gender. Sex is the biological identity whereas gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men. Women in Bangladesh are expected to be gentle, tender, nurturing and passive preserving the feminine characteristics. So, many in our society can not support women for practicing any kind of aggressive sports.

'I have been practicing karate for two years. My family didn't take it seriously at first but my brother had my back. He supported me and even paid the fees for my karate classes. Later on, my parents started to appreciate it. I have faced many people who didn't acknowledge it rather made fun about my skills', said Nujhat Jarin Twinkle, a karate practitioner in Bangladesh Kyokushin.

So, what could be the reasons for this reluctance despite the utter need for women to learn self-defense in this era?

Somehow our society has implanted the idea in our mind that women are less strong, they can not defeat a man physically. As a result, their practicing karate will not be effective in defense when they are attacked by a man let alone a group of men. So, they are often preferred not to waste their time and energy in practicing karate as it requires consistent practicing of several years to learn it properly.

Moreover, we are familiar with women karate tournaments where both competitors are women. It helps us to grow subconsciously a mentality that a woman can not fight a man. Obviously there are biological differences between man and woman. However, one or a many attackers can be defeated by a trained karateka, whether that person is a man or woman. The calibre does not depend on sex rather dedication and practice.

Besides, families tend to be less supportive to their girls or women for practicing karate since they think it will not be beneficial financially. On the other hand, practicing karate and participating in tournaments require fees which is considered as extra burden for many families.

'Women's learning karate is not easily accepted in our society. In many cases, girls face barriers by their family', said Arsun Nahar Lia, silver medalist in fight (55 kg) category in the International Goju Ryu Karate Championship. It was held at Sent Boarding SCH in Kathmandu, Nepal from 1-2 April 2019 and organized by Nepal Goju Ryu Karate Federation.

Arsun Nahar Lia brought this victory for Bangladesh by immense endeavor and hard training. She was holding orange belt while she participated in the tournament.

'I used to learn Goju Ryo karate after my classes in my college campus', said Lia. She studied in Viqarunnisa Noon School & College. Now she is a third-year Dhaka University student of Department of Public Administration.

She has also learnt Bhasha, Bangladeshi martial art and specialized form of defense. She also participated in International Karate Tournament in Shilliguri, India.

Apart from the social barriers, there lacks adequate training institutions specially in rural areas to pursue martial arts. Addressing this problem, Arsun Nahar Lia remarked, ' Karate should be added to school curriculum in order to make girls confident, independent and safe in our society ' ,

Any masculine society prefers women to be gentle and delicate. So, women practicing karate as a sport of passion or need for protection becomes difficult to receive acceptance in our society. Also, their skills and endeavours are not recognised as men's since many people remain skeptical of women's caliber.

However, for the urge to pamper girls, to keep them away from the bruises of practice or to preserve their feminine characteristics like beauty and softness women are preferred to follow less aggressive sports.

So, our society needs to grow the mentality that like every other fields the base of success lies under hard work and perseverance. We need to encourage our women and men to engage themselves in practicing karate for the sake of need or passion, removing the ongoing sexism in karate.

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