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## Gender misconception and socio-cultural factors affecting women's participation and career advancement in Taekwondo in Nigeria

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### Abstract

This study investigates the gendered disparities in participation and career advancement within the field of Taekwondo in Nigeria. Despite the universal principles of equality and fairness in sports, Nigerian women remain underrepresented due to socio-cultural, economic, and organizational factors. The paper discusses how gender misconceptions, such as the belief that taekwondo is a masculine sport, create a hostile environment, dissuading women from participating and advancing within the sport. Stereotyping, coupled with societal and religious beliefs, are examined to showcase their role in limiting female involvement. The paper also sheds light on structural issues, such as the lack of adequate training facilities and representation in leadership positions, further exacerbating the gender gap. Despite a recent increase in female participation in Nigerian sports, taekwondo remains dominated by men, with only 8% of the clubs owned by women. The research emphasizes the need for societal, cultural, and institutional changes to foster an inclusive environment, promote gender equality, and bolster women's participation and career growth in taekwondo.

**Keywords:** Taekwondo, women, gender misconception, gender stereotype, Nigeria, socio-cultural factors

### Introduction

In Nigeria, as in many African countries, female participation in sports such as taekwondo is relatively low compared to males (Ogunjimi *et al.*, 2013)<sup>[17]</sup>. These differences reflect socio-cultural, economic and organizational factors (Akpan *et al.*, 2017)<sup>[15]</sup>.

Taekwondo is one of the oldest martial arts/combat sport which originated from the ancient Korea. Today, Taekwondo is an internationally recognized sport, and a world renowned form of self-defense. Taekwondo is a martial art that in "today's" form of self-defense has evolved by combining many different styles of martial arts that existed in Korea over the last 2,000 years and some martial arts styles from countries that surround Korea (Morris, 1994)<sup>[15]</sup>. Taekwondo is a contact sport that entails the use of the hands for punches delivered around the chest and stomach region, the use of the feet for kicks delivered from the stomach region to the head, and the use of the mind for skillful thinking and reflex calculation. Taekwondo requires perfection in kicks, punches, blocks and physical performance (Elif & Mustafa, 2018)<sup>[9]</sup>. Taekwondo does not involve the use of weapons for its practice especially in the aspect of competitive sports, therefore, it is not just like any form of street fights, but an organized martial art with tenets guiding its practitioners to build self and community discipline. As stated by Morris (1994)<sup>[15]</sup>:

Taekwondo is an empty-hand combat form that entails the use of the whole body. *Tae* means "to Kick" or "Smash with the feet," *Kwon* implies "punching" or "destroying with the hand or fist," and *Do* means "way" or "method." Taekwondo thus, is the technique of unarmed combat for self-defense that involves the skillful application of techniques that include punching, jumping kicks, blocks, dodges, parrying actions with hands and feet. It is more than a mere physical fighting skill, representing as it does a way of thinking and a pattern of life requiring strict discipline. It is a system of training both the mind and the body in which great emphasis is placed on the development of the trainee's moral character.

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The sport of taekwondo requires the ability to produce the maximum strength in a short time and a high level of sportive performance (Singh, 2012) <sup>[18]</sup>. Many Nigerian women believe taekwondo is a combat game for only men because they see it as a fight than a sport. This belief is highly influenced by the social, cultural and religious nature of the different ethnic and religious groups that make up the Nigerian society. The few women that participate in competitive taekwondo in Nigeria retire immediately they participate in the national sports festival or immediately they graduate from the university so they could get married, while others abandon the sports immediately they get married because the society believe that if a woman keeps participating in taekwondo activities, she will beat up her husband at the slightest provocation or misunderstanding

About 30 years ago, the Nigerian society described women who participate in active combat sports and martial arts as “men in women’s clothing”. Some of these sportswomen were called “men” because of the muscular physique, while some people label them as “women without womb”. This stereotyping discouraged many mothers from allowing their young girls participate in sports. It also discouraged many women from participating and advancing a career in sports. Adeyanju (2011, as cited in Joshua *et al.*, 2013) <sup>[11]</sup> opined that the low rate of women involvement in sports is not due to lack of interest in sports by them, instead, it is due to the long history of direct and indirect forms of discrimination and stereo-typing that women have to contend with. The practical nature of taekwondo as a contact sport has made it challenging for many women in Nigeria to participate and advance a career in it. Taekwondo is one such sport where gender stereotypes influence women's participation and career advancement. Despite the sport's universal values of equality and fairness, cultural factors and societal beliefs continue to influence female participation (Lyras & Peachey, 2011) <sup>[13]</sup>.

### Gender misconceptions

Gender misconceptions have continually influenced the perception and participation of women in sports, particularly in physically demanding ones such as Taekwondo. In Nigeria, these misconceptions are deeply entrenched, forming barriers that prevent women from fully participating in, and benefiting from, the sport of Taekwondo. Culturally, societal beliefs and stereotypes often associate sports such as Taekwondo with masculinity, attributing characteristics such as strength, aggressiveness, and competitiveness to men. Women, on the other hand, are often viewed through a lens of physical inferiority and delicacy, giving rise to the misbelief that they are not suitable for such physically demanding activities. Gender stereotypes and misconceptions create a hostile environment that discourages female Taekwondo participants (Messner, 2002) <sup>[14]</sup>. Gender problems in sports often stem from deeply ingrained cultural and social beliefs. Traditionally, physical contact sports such as taekwondo are viewed as masculine, creating the impression that women are not suited for such activities (Blinde & Taub, 1992) <sup>[7]</sup>. This misconception is driven by gender stereotypes that women are physically weaker and more numerous, limiting their participation in interactive games (Koivula, 2001) <sup>[12]</sup>. This presumption fuels discriminatory attitudes towards female athletes, making them less likely to attract sponsorship, thereby diminishing their opportunities for career advancement.

Gender stereotypes in sport perpetuate the lack of female participation in taekwondo. These stereotypes often suggest that women are physically weaker and less competitive than men (Adedokun *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[2]</sup>. As a result, female athletes may face discrimination, which makes them less attractive and reduces their opportunities for career advancement.

The persistence of gender misconception has consequences beyond participation; it also affects career advancement in Taekwondo. Nigerian women in Taekwondo face numerous challenges in advancing in their careers. Career progression within the field of Taekwondo also tends to be heavily influenced by these gender misconceptions. Despite their skills and expertise, Nigerian women often find themselves underrepresented in leadership positions within Taekwondo. Women are frequently excluded from positions of leadership due to societal beliefs that men are better leaders (Hovden, 2000) <sup>[10]</sup>. Additionally, structural obstacles further exacerbate this issue. For instance, the availability and quality of training facilities for women in Nigeria are often inadequate compared to those available for men. Women face structural barriers as well, such as inadequate training facilities and unequal professional development opportunities (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014) <sup>[1]</sup>. In conclusion, gender misconceptions about female participation in Taekwondo in Nigeria have led to a hostile environment that discourages female participation, limits their career advancement, and hinders their opportunities for growth within the sport. There is a need for societal, cultural, and structural changes to remove these barriers, foster inclusivity, and promote equal opportunities within Taekwondo.

### Social and Cultural Factors

Children’s socialization patterns have a profound effect on their future choices, including play. Traditional gender roles in Nigeria limit girls’ participation in sport (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011). For example, girls tend to be involved in more household activities, which may not support their participation in sports such as taekwondo. In contrast, children are encouraged to be active and empowered, characteristics that are more consistent with sport participation (Chalabae, Sarrazin, Fontayne, Boiché, & Clément-Guillotin, 2013) <sup>[8]</sup>. Cultural beliefs and values significantly influence women’s participation and career development in taekwondo in Nigeria.

Like many other martial arts, the general perception of taekwondo is that it is a 'masculine' sport and inappropriate for women (Blinde & Taub, 1992) <sup>[7]</sup>. The physicality and perceived violence associated with taekwondo can lead to cultural anti-feminism to be involved. Social expectations and religious beliefs limit women’s participation in taekwondo. Social expectations that women should focus primarily on family roles, and religious beliefs that stigmatize women’s participation in sportswear limit their participation in taekwondo (Ademola & Omiyefa, 2013) <sup>[3]</sup>. Some other socio-cultural beliefs have brainwashed women that taekwondo and other martial arts changes the hormones that make up the woman’s body to that of a man and thereby hinders them from getting pregnant and having children. Cultural values and societal beliefs play a significant role in influencing women's participation in Taekwondo in Nigeria. Despite the fact that Taekwondo is a non-discriminatory sport, the number of Nigerian women who participate is significantly lower than that of men (Amusa, Toriola, & Onyewadume, 2012) <sup>[6]</sup>. Lack of institutional support is

another factor limiting women's participation in taekwondo and their career advancement. Nigerian women face challenges such as inadequate training, lack of professional trainers, and lack of support, which have been identified as barriers to participation in taekwondo (Akindutire & Akpan, 2011) [4]. Furthermore, the lack of representation of women in decision-making roles in sport organizations affects their career development. This lack of representation may hinder gender-specific policies and strategies that promote women's participation and professional development in taekwondo.

Generally, sports in Nigeria experience a low female participation because of the cultural and social stereotyping of women in sports. Social expectations and norms play an important role in limiting women's participation in taekwondo. In many communities in Nigeria, martial arts such as taekwondo are seen as masculine (Ogbeide, 2019) [16]. In addition, some religious and traditional beliefs discourage women from participating in physically demanding activities (Ukaga *et al.*, 2021) [19].

In order to remove these barriers, it is necessary to advocate social, cultural and institutional changes and promote gender equality in sport. Increased investment in women's sport, promotion of positive role models, and the development of gender-sensitive policies and procedures within sport organizations can improve women's participation and performance in sports such as taekwondo in Nigeria

In recent times, there has been a progressive growth in female participation in sports in Nigeria especially in athletics, football, tennis, volleyball, handball, and a host of other sports. Despite the growing women's participation and career building in other sports, there is very little growth, career advancement and female participation in Taekwondo in Nigeria. This is evident in the number of taekwondo clubs owned by men and women in Nigeria. 92% of the taekwondo clubs in Nigeria are owned by men. This is evidently caused by societal, parental, Religious and Ethnic stereotyping and discrimination. Fortunately, the few women that actively participate in taekwondo in Nigeria do so because of the passion they have for the sports. These women also understand the health benefits, societal benefit as it equips one with self-defense skills, and the economic and career benefit of taekwondo.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

The increasing participation of women in taekwondo and employment growth in Nigeria requires stronger efforts by the public and private sector. These can be achieved by making and implementing policies that encourage equitable distribution of resources, to drive gender consciousness and educate the community to challenge traditional views of women in the sport. The findings of this study contribute to the growing literature on gender equality advocacy in sport and highlight the need for urgent intervention in the Nigerian context.

Addressing gender stereotypes is of utmost importance to increase women's participation and career development in taekwondo in Nigeria. This requires the implementation of policies aimed at eradicating gender stereotypes and stereotypes. Such a policy should emphasize the values of equality, inclusion and non-discrimination inherent in sport.

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