



Code of Conduct for a Women-Friendly Dojo

Dojo walk-through activity: your dojo through her eyes

By Gretchen Riordan

Pretend you are a prospective student – and a woman. Walk through your dojo, seeing it from her perspective. Imagine her journey through your dojo, from the marketing that gets her through the door, to her first class, to her black belt grading – all the way to becoming an instructor in your dojo.

It begins with you!

Our ideas and beliefs about women and men are shaped by the culture we live in. *Reflect on your own beliefs and values about gender.* What do you believe and value about women? Where do your own beliefs and values about women come from?

Are some of your beliefs and values about gender based on stereotypes? Do you think other people share your beliefs and values about gender or do others have different ideas? Can you understand and respect different perspectives, even if you disagree with them? Finally, do your beliefs and values about women affect the way you teach and treat your students? When you imagine your top student, your protégé... is this person a woman or a man?

Marketing and promotion: who is welcome?

Your marketing material and dojo styling send a clear message about who you want – and don't want – in your dojo. Do you regularly use images of *both* women and men in your marketing? What are they doing? Are the men training hard while the women are teaching children, or just sitting around looking pretty?

Are there images of female and male practitioners visible inside your dojo? Would a female prospective student look at your website, or visit your dojo, and think, 'this place is for guys, it's not really for me'?

If you want to attract and keep women, you need to *show* them that you take them seriously by representing them *well* in your promotional material as well as dojo decorations, social media pages and so on. Male students also need to see images of women training seriously, so

they get the message that female students are serious students of the art.

Speaking of the women's change room...

Do you have one? Is there a separate change room and toilet for each gender? Are they clean? Does everybody change in the appropriate space or do guys tend to walk around the dojo in various states of undress? A good way to avoid dramas and keep everyone comfortable in your dojo is to create a culture of modesty.

Hygiene is important. Does everyone have good personal hygiene? Remind all students to wash their own uniforms after every training session. Nobody wants to roll with the stinky guy who doesn't know how to use deodorant or detergent. Are all students required to wear a t-shirt under their gi tops? Remember your prospective female student – does she want guys staring at her breasts? No! Do you want chest hair stuck between your teeth... probably not. Finally, if the students clean the dojo, make sure then men and women share the cleaning equally. You might have to give explicit instructions about these things, and it might feel awkward, but that's better than losing potential students.

On the mats: what is the dojo culture like, through her eyes?

Do not presume to know why a female student wants to train, based on stereotypes about her gender. She might not be interested in losing weight, or learning self-defence. Or, she might be. If you're curious why she's interested in martial arts, ask her. She will feel respected as an individual.

Be aware of the language you use in the dojo. Comments such as, 'hit like a girl', 'just do girl push ups' or 'she's strong for a girl' position female students as 'less than' males. Comments on women's bodies or jokes about 'that time of the month' are *never* okay. Guys who hear such comments from their leader will think it's okay to pump themselves up by putting women down. Women who hear it will probably leave and not tell you why.

If your prospective student sees that other female students are taken seriously, she is more likely join the dojo and stay. If the guys see a woman being used in demonstrations, they're more likely to respect her as an equal. So, include female students in *all* aspects of the training. Use women as well as men in demonstrations wherever possible. Do not use female students for stereotypical 'women's self defence' demonstrations but exclude them from regular demonstrations.

This next one is a big one... *ensure that the physical contact is appropriate for the physicality and skill level of all students.* If unsure, just ask! Sometimes guys don't realise their own strength and go too hard on someone who is smaller than them. Allow female students (in fact, all students) to communicate their needs and limits to their training partner. This is a great way to avoid injuries, attrition and insurance claims.

Sometimes guys don't want to attack women. This is a good thing – outside the dojo. Inside the dojo, male students need to learn to train seriously with women, including using appropriate levels of physical contact. Again, you can model this by demonstrating techniques with the female students yourself.

Teaching, explaining, helping and making suggestions: benevolent sexism

Teaching between students is a big problem, which affects the whole dojo but arguably affects women more frequently than men. Do not allow male (or female) students to 'teach', 'explain', 'help', or make 'suggestions' to a female training partner, especially if he is junior to the woman he is trying to 'help'!

This situation is based on *benevolent sexism* – the belief that women are less competent than men and need men's help. It feels really awful to be on the receiving end of benevolent sexism. When one student teaches another without authorisation from the Instructor, they may be teaching and learning the wrong thing. This then needs to be unlearned, which is a frustrating waste of time. This situation also prevents the student who is being 'taught' from making her own mistakes and learning from them by herself – an important part of learning any new skill. Perhaps worse, being allowed to 'teach' when you're not the instructor will inflate the ego, which is the opposite of what martial arts is supposed to be all about. So, if students are not allowed to teach one another on the mats in your dojo, enforce this at all times.

Finally, if your martial arts involves paired drills, ensure that everyone always has a partner or a group to work within. Is your female student always left without a partner when everyone pairs up? Do the women only work together and never with the guys? If there is informal after class training, is your female student or students invited to join in or do the guys ignore or exclude her?

Social exclusion is often very subtle, but it is very real. You may not notice it at first, but remember to look through her eyes at the habitual behaviour and even body language of your students. Are they inclusive

or do you need to intervene and micromanage the training relationships a little bit?

Non Fraternisation Policies

When you set up a dojo, you didn't set up a dating agency. But when female students join your dojo, are they treated as "new prospects" by the male students? New prospective dates? What is your policy to protect women coming into the dojo from this all too common attitude? When new students of all genders join a dojo there is a power imbalance. They perceive the students already there are far more powerful and skilled and therefore can idolise them inappropriately. It's human. But what policies and practices do you have in place to ensure that new students (of all genders) are protected and treated appropriately? It is the women who often drop out of training when they break up with a higher ranked student in the dojo. If you value your female students, you'll ensure they are treated with respect.

So, your female student joins the dojo and trains hard for many years. Now she's ready to become an instructor. Awesome!

Women *can* and *do* teach *all* elements of the martial arts to *all* demographics, including adult men. Include promising female students in your instructor development program. Do not assume she's only interested in teaching women and children. These are important roles and if she's interested in them, terrific. However, do not assume that that's all she can do. If she's good enough to teach women and children, she's good enough to teach everyone.

If you think your male students won't accept a female instructor, then you have a big problem with sexism and a general lack of respect for instructors and the martial art itself within your dojo culture.

It is your job, as dojo leader, to lead by example and create a culture where everyone wants to learn from a good instructor regardless of that person's gender. You can do this by ensuring that all students follow the correct etiquette towards all instructors, irrespective of their gender, at all times. For example, if all black belt instructors are addressed as 'So-and-so Sensei' in your dojo, enforce this at all times. Don't allow students to call male instructors 'Sam Sensei' and female instructors 'Samantha'. Again, micromanage this stuff a little bit and the big picture will take care of itself.

Do not allow students to interrupt, correct or talk over the top of a female instructor (or any instructor). If she's good enough to be an

instructor by the high standards of your dojo, then all students will benefit from listening and trying to do things her way for the duration of her class.

On the subject of sexual violence

It is statistically likely that a female student has experienced violence from a male perpetrator, including sexual assault. If a woman (or any student) has been assaulted, she may suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and become triggered by certain activities and scenarios. Be aware that behaviours like crying, freezing and disassociation, hyperventilation, avoiding certain people and situations are typical signs and symptoms of PTSD. They are *not* signs of weakness – they are signs of a survivor. If a student seems distressed, don't make a big deal out of it. Just allow her to take some time out to manage her distress.

Given the statistics on sexual violence, it is never appropriate for a male student or instructor to 'explain' sexual violence to a woman. It is extremely upsetting to be on the receiving end of a man 'explaining' something traumatic, which you've personally lived through. Some subjects, such as sexual violence, must be addressed with caution and sensitivity, if they are addressed at all. *It is inappropriate and unnecessary to name some techniques 'rape defence'*. Yes – this happens. Hopefully not in your dojo, though.

If you want to be a truly safe space for women, there is a lot of literature and training on trauma - informed martial arts instruction. It is a sign of how serious you are as to what investment you put into educating yourself and all of your instructors of all genders, in this area.

When things go sideways

If a female student raises an issue, listen with an open mind. It was probably difficult for her to speak up.

Create and employ a formal complaints process and ensure that the people who implement it can do so objectively and with sensitivity.

Do not expect female students to be ambassadors or representatives for their entire gender. Do not assume that one woman can answer for the thoughts, feelings or actions of another woman just because they are of the same gender.

Prevention is best...

Create and enforce a dojo non-fraternisation policy.

Create, circulate and enforce a code of ethics and behaviour in your dojo. The Code should prohibit sexism, ableism, racism, homophobia, transphobia and other oppressive speech and behaviours. The Code should be enforced by the Chief Instructor consistently, not just occasionally.

This code should be signed by all instructors and students on joining, and should be clearly posted on a noticeboard or prominent area.

By encouraging and creating safe spaces for women to enter martial arts training, you will not only increase the viability of your dojo, you will also be investing in the healthy future of your martial art for generations to come.

