



Guide to Choosing a Woman-Friendly Martial Arts School

Choosing a martial arts school can involve a lot of different factors - price, location, style (in close or arms length, ground or stand up, hard or soft to name a few - see our guide for choosing the right style for you) and timetable for starters.

But beyond those first choices, one of the biggest factors that will determine if a woman will remain training over a long period of time is the way the dojo perceives and values women. Here's a quick guide to help women evaluate if a dojo is going to be a good fit as they start their martial arts journey.

1. Evaluate the School's Inclusivity

- **Diverse Representation:** Check if the school's promotional materials and website feature women and female identified people actively participating in training and demonstrations. Similarly, are all the pictures on the walls of the dojo of men, or are they representative of all genders?
- **Gender Balance:** Look for schools that have female instructors and a diverse student base. Are the female instructors only teaching children or are they also teaching adult men?
- **Support, advocacy re hijabs/ religious clothing:** are women & girls who wear hijabs supported and enabled to wear their choice of covering, or treated as difficult? Is it implied they shouldn't because (insert reasons) or are they treated differently from other students? Similarly is a space made available for women who need to pray? Is there a dedicated space to wash before prayers? Is the dojo a culturally space space that respects the differences of all women and girls without making them feel othered?

2. Assess the Dojo Environment

- **Facilities:** Ensure the dojo has separate and clean changing rooms and restrooms for each gender. Women should have a place to change away from men and parents waiting for their kids class to finish.
- **Hygiene:** Confirm that there are policies in place to maintain hygiene, such as clean uniforms and good personal hygiene.
- **Modesty ;** Ensure that men can't just strip off in the dojo in front of women and kids (it happens) Women of CALD/ BAME backgrounds often find this really uncomfortable and it can be a barrier to their training.
- **Women's only classes are actually taught by women:** many classes say they teach "women's only sessions" only to discover the classes are taught by men. For women of cultural/ religious backgrounds who cannot train with male bodies, this is an insurmountable obstacle.

3. Observe Training Culture

- **Respectful Language:** Pay attention to the language used by instructors and students. Avoid schools where comments reinforce stereotypes or diminish female students. How do the instructors and students talk? Saying

things like “you hit like a girl” or “that’s gay” or gendered terms like “girl push-ups” are disrespectful and harmful. Will you be ok training in that kind of environment?

- **Equal Opportunities:** Look for schools that involve women in all aspects of training and avoid those that use female students only for gender-specific demonstrations.

4. Consider the Instructor’s Approach

- **Training Methods:** Ensure that physical contact is appropriate for all students’ skill levels and comfort. Instructors should encourage communication about personal limits.
- **Supportive Teaching:** Evaluate whether female students receive the same level of respect and encouragement as male students, and if the instructors address all students equally.
- **Trauma informed instruction:** many schools purport to support women and victim-survivors, but do they know how to teach and instruct, and create a safe space that is trauma informed? This is vitally important and can be make - or - break for some women and girls weighing up their options.

5. Review Policies and Support

- **Complaints Process:** Check if the school has a clear, formal process for handling complaints and ensuring respectful behaviour.
- **Ethical Standards:** Ensure that the school has a code of conduct that prohibits sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia and all other forms of discrimination.

6. Look for Community and Support

- **Instructor Development:** See if there are opportunities for women to advance to instructor roles and whether the school supports female instructors equally.
- **Social Inclusion:** Observe if female students are integrated into all aspects of the dojo community and not excluded from informal training or social events.
- In the case of social events, observe if these are supportive of all needs - respectful of cultures where certain foods, or alcohol is prohibited, and of those who do not want to drink / are in recovery. Are social events organised with everyone’s needs in mind, whether it is accessibility, child minding, affordability, culturally appropriate, respectful to all. It * does * take a lot more effort to create social opportunities that are fully inclusive, but it is not impossible. It just takes a genuine desire to include everyone. Observe carefully!

7. Trust Your Instincts

- **Comfort Level:** Visit the dojo and speak with current students and instructors. Trust your instincts about whether the environment feels welcoming and respectful.
- **If you get a bad feeling: believe yourself.** Trust that gut feeling. It's ok to look elsewhere.
- **It it doesn't look right:** it probably isn't. While it can be incredibly disappointing to feel you have invested time in a place that slowly reveals it is not what it purports to be, you're better off knowing up front and being able to move on. Don't let a bad experience sour you from pursuing martial arts. Only with more women achieving high levels of skill, and taking up positions of authority such as coaches, referees and instructors, can we change the outcomes for future generations of women and girls.

Choosing the right martial arts school is about finding a place where you feel respected, supported, and included. Take the time to visit potential schools and ask questions to ensure it aligns with your values and needs. Don't be afraid to try more than one dojo and most importantly don't assume that things are just a "one off" if you hear or see something that makes you uncomfortable. Chances are it's the norm and you don't have to spend your hard earned money to listen to it week in week out.

