



## ENGAGING WOMEN AND GIRLS IN MMA

GENERAL AWARENESS COVERING THEORETICAL ISSUES, IMPLICATIONS AND PRACTICE TO ENGAGING WOMEN AND GIRLS AT THE GRASS ROOTS LEVEL OF MIXED MARTIAL ARTS



# AWARENESS TOWARDS ENGAGING WOMEN AND GIRLS IN MMA

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The purpose of the document is to offer direction and awareness for members of the International Mixed Martial Arts Federation (IMMAF), towards theoretical issues, barriers and practice of engaging women and girls in the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA).

# INTRODUCTION

Since its launch in 2020, the IMMAF Women's Commission, led by Hayzia Bellem, has assisted IMMAF member nations in the creation of National Women's Commissions, worldwide. The aim of the IMMAF Women's Commission is to give guidance to every country in auditing the situation locally and to define what actions to take to develop MMA for women and girls at every level.

At its upper professional level, the sport Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a world leader in its representation of gender equality. Pioneering stars of past and present such as Gina Carano, Ronda Rousey, Holly Holm, Cristiane Justino, Amanda Nunes, Valentina Schevchenko, Joanna Jędrzejczyk, Weili Zhang and Rose Namajunas have proved that unlike many of the world's most prominent sports, women in MMA are able to achieve equal prominence and opportunity in line with that of their male counterparts. However, below the upper echelon of the sport's professional and commercial summit, women's participation in MMA is a narrow stream, globally. At a national-competitive level, particularly among amateurs, opportunity for continued activity often stalls outside of the international IMMAF championships due to a significant lack of female competitors which leads to an even greater lack of available or suitable opponents for athletes at varying levels. It is not uncommon for competitors to only have a few rivals within their nation. Sports with a greater leisurely appeal statistically attract more women and subsequently produces greater depth and numbers at a competitive level. And so, while addressing the need to create new avenues of opportunity for the current generation of MMA competitor, it is important to identify and remedy the root issues that have resulted in the current situation, that of grass roots engagement.

Channon and Matthews (2016) presented the report on key findings and issues raised during the Martial Arts Studies and Research Network seminar, hosted by The University of Brighton with the aim of addressing how clubs at a grass roots level may best improve upon the introduction of women and girls to martial arts. In this document we acknowledge and adapt existing research and discussion points towards the context of the grass roots MMA and IMMAF's international strategy for women's development.

# FOREWORD

## BY HAYZIA BELLEM, IMMAF WOMEN'S COMMISSION CHAIR



It is our great ambition to highlight the beauty of women in Mixed Martial Arts. Allowing women to show their strength and power sends a great message to future generations. MMA is not about violence. MMA is a universal combat sport where every person can express themselves. By developing MMA for women at a global level, we also get closer to realizing a universal need: to reach men, women, girls and boys, with equality of welcoming opportunity.

The IMMAF Women's Commission took the challenge to use the stand-by time during the global pandemic to create a network and spread the word about our initiative.

The IMMAF Women's Commission aims at creating a strong relationship with national federations in developing a strategy to liaise with gyms. The heart of MMA is within gyms and the individuals with whom we want to develop a bond and empower. MMA gyms are the direct contact to individuals at the grass roots level. By offering guidance we hope to be able to attract more women and girls to MMA, may it be for recreational fitness and enjoyment, or taking the journey towards competitive action. Also, MMA gyms offer the possibility for women to have leading positions. This is the place where they develop their skills as leaders, coaches, referees or gym directors.

# FOREWARD

## BY DENSIGN WHITE MBE, IMMAF CEO

Engaging women and girls into the sport of MMA is critically important if we want to see our sport grow in terms of participation and membership numbers. Many sports today are still male dominated and this needs to become more equitable. The gym environment needs to become more welcoming for women and girls which requires practical policies, for example women only sessions, run by female coaches, and sports attire allowed to be worn that complies with religious or cultural beliefs. There is also the question of fairness and equality especially when it comes to access, representation of women at all levels within the sport and pay although the latter is not an issue in MMA as much as it has been in many other sports.

I would like to encourage all of our federations to embrace the IMMAF efforts to engage women and girls and to help us to remove all barriers. The IMMAF Women's Commission is doing great work to promote women and girls in the sport of MMA and some federations have already taken the initiative to create their own women's commission. Let us show the world that IMMAF is at the cutting edge in developing programmes that engage women and girls to be coaches, participate at all levels in competition including refereeing and judging, to be administrators and the leaders of tomorrow.

Its time. Let's make it happen.

Yours in Sport,

Densign White MBE



## IDENTIFYING BARRIERS

- It has been discussed that a significant social hurdle to the participation of women and girls in sport is the embedded social norm within wider society of an association with masculinity. While these outdated concepts may be far less prominent today for sports such as cycling, it can be considered that MMA in particular faces this hurdle at an entry level due to the misconception drawn between MMA and a perceived image of masculinity through 'fighting' and more strenuous physical activity, in addition to the over-representation of men within training environments, altogether contributing to a less inviting image. The engagement strategies of IMMAF, particularly that of youth pathways for girls and boys, actively removes the external perceptions of 'fighting' and physical contests to focus on enjoyable and fulfilling physical activity with more diverse goals and optional pathways for progression as practitioners become older and more advance, be it casual/recreational for leisure activity, or towards an eventual competitive route.
- Studies show that men and women source regular physical activity at different levels and in different ways. The variables associated with activity levels generally differ, therefore interventions promoting physical activity should take these differences into account (Azevedo et al, 2007). It has been indicated that enjoyment as a primary reason to exercise is reported more among men than it is women, with men often favouring social sport while more women are focused on individualized activities (swimming, walking, and jogging) with a specific fitness goal or objective beyond or in addition to its fun nature.
- Socioeconomic background and level of income plays a significant role in the activity levels of people around the world. For women, those who balance work with home life and parenting are statistically less likely to participate in organised sport, as are children who come from low-income households. Hurdles that women and girls face to engaging in sport should not be generalised and sensitivity must be directed towards differences in age, social class, ethnicity, local culture, motivation, confidence, prior experience, personal goals, and more.
- Puberty can provoke a significant turning point in the relationship between girls and sport. Studies have highlighted the correlation with girls quitting sport during this stage of life and is a first widely noticeable and measurable threshold that obstructs participation.

# INVITING TRAINING ENVIRONMENTS

- A welcoming, safe and trusting training environment is important for retention and a positive experience in order to shake the stereotype of MMA embodying a 'male-dominated' environment.
- While not always deliberate, certain 'banter' and throw-away comments can continue the negative and outdated assumptions of women in sport, phrases such as 'man-up' can project a feeling of female inferiority and may counteract motivation. When adapting a friendly yet male-dominated environment, coaches must be mindful of language which may promote exclusion, sexism or other inappropriate messages.
- Cleanliness and hygiene are also important to producing a more welcoming environment for women, girls and youth in general, especially when considering the image taken in by parents. Appropriate physical spaces for changing should be strictly acknowledged by men and women in order to maintain privacy and avoid uncomfortable situations due to individuals undressing in open view.
- "Girls drop out of sports a lot of the times because they don't see girls at the highest level to the same extent that boys do," – (Jen Welter, sports psychologist and NFL coach). Use of imagery both online and within clubs, such as use of posters or online marketing, can be conducive to an inviting environment for women and girls. Certain club facilities and/or their online platforms may use marketing imagery or decorative, motivational images of MMA standouts. Decorating training environments and online platforms with an equal spotlight on women's accomplishments is an opportunity to establish a strong and first impression with the indication that women are welcomed and valued as athletes.
- Developing new and engaging concepts towards MMA classes, such as MMA cardio or family friendly classes, can appeal to newcomers with fitness goals or young children and their parents, creating opportunities to enter fun yet more casual fitness programs and magnify the potential of family participation in MMA. The advertisement of gradings can highlight avenues for progression, as well as further opportunities to grow within the sport, such as becoming a referee, judge or coach. Ultimately, the IMMAF Women's Commission highlights and capitalizes on the positive impact of MMA upon physical and mental health.

## PUBERTY RELATED BARRIERS

- By the age of 13 – 15 girls are less active than boys with only 8% of girls engaging in the 60 minutes of physical activity per day recommended for children age 5 – 18 (Women in Sport, 2018). Puberty can significantly impact relations between boys and girls, introduce new differences and impact self-confidence. It is at this point that gendered stereotypes grow stronger.
- At this stage of life the training environment should motivate and encourage girls to feel valued and keep up fun physical activity and training with the ability to source support from female coaches and role models. The option to train using a martial arts Gi can be a helpful source of comfort for individuals who feel conscious of their body.
- Parents can play a significant support role. National federations should encourage clubs and coaches to make parents feel involved and informed on the progress of their child.





# PUBERTY AND CONFIDENCE

## ***Key 'Always Puberty & Confidence Wave IV' Study Findings (Businesswire, 2016)***

- By age 17, at the end of puberty, more than half of girls (51%) will have quit sports.
- 7 out of 10 girls who quit sports during puberty felt they did not belong in sports.
- Only 1/3 of girls feel that society encourages girls to play sports.
- Three of the top benefits of staying in sports girls reported are increased confidence (62%), teamwork (64%) and leadership skills (54%).



## SEGREGATION OR INTERGRATION?

- 'Women-only' training groups are a regular feature within the fitness industry and have important merits towards appropriate sensitivity, comfort and trust leading to greater engagement. Women-only groups should be promoted and can embody significant benefits such as providing support to girls during puberty and confidence to both women and girls who may find training alongside males to be intimidating or uncomfortable. Sport, martial arts and physical activity in general can be a significant aid to individuals who have experienced traumatic experiences or abuse. MMA can reintroduce and sense of empowerment to women who have suffered abuse, and so the option for women-only groups is important in presenting a welcoming hand.
- Women-only groups can be a welcoming entry into MMA and can still present the opportunity to achieve long-term training goals without feeling the need to 'step up' to mixed gender groups. Sex-segregation should not lead to the perception of women's groups being 'second-class'. Opportunity for mixed gender groups should be maintained and managed along the lines of individuals with suitable experience levels training together at the informed discretion of coaches.
- The IMMAF makes it a priority to make available training platforms for all coaches with education towards athlete safeguarding policy and ethical behaviors to protect women and young people from unethical behaviors.



## COACHES AND ROLE MODELS

- The elite professional level of MMA has produced no shortage of female role models, inspiring women and girls to follow the sport and participate. A similar sense of awe should be enabled to exist also at the local level, from club-to-club, with newcomers able to establish relationships and identify local role models with a level of access that provides the next motivational step beyond the initial inspiration of a Ronda Rousey or Rose Namajunas.
- The leaders within a training environment contribute significantly to its identity. The prominence of female coaches can be highly valuable and conducive to creating a welcoming and comfortable feeling for women and girls, at least within their early introduction to the sport.
- Encouraging women to pursue coaching roles will significantly counter lingering gender misconceptions. It is important that female coaches are not confined to coaching newcomers or youth groups, but that capable and qualified female coaches are given opportunity to coach both men and women in experienced adult groups also.
- In addition to building confidence; teaching young girls about teamwork, concepts surrounding winning and losing, as well as encouraging physical and mental development, can all equip individuals with the tools to succeed in life. Sixty-one percent of female executives said sports contributed to their career success.



A significant amount of research exists within these areas. Women's commissions at national level can draw from existing research within a national-cultural context in order to present awareness and guidance for representation of coaches, in addition to the previous sections on effects of puberty, integration, environment and cultural-social barriers, nation to nation.

# 2021 RESEARCH

- **RELIGION AND ACCESSABILITY**

The popularisation of participating within MMA should ensure that the sport's accessibility reaches women and girls of different faiths and religious backgrounds. Promoting the effective use of full body coverings such as long sleeve rash guards, leggings, bodysuits, Gis and sports hijabs demonstrates equal opportunity within MMA. IMMAF is set to work with partners in the coming year to discuss use of religious clothing and research practical elements for sport hijabs which retain effective application in full contact MMA competition.

- **PREGNANCY**

In 2021 IMMAF aims to research key factors relating to awareness of pregnant athletes and practitioners. The IMMAF Women's Commission will work directly with medical experts and women in MMA who have gone through pregnancy, discussing their experiences and opportunities to maintain involvement and safe training, as well as guidance for getting back to training after pregnancy.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & FURTHER READING

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