

# Perceptions and experiences of world karate referees: Implications for gender (in)equity

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## ABSTRACT

This study, which focuses on women referees in the karate branch, is therefore of unique value. The study group of the research consists of 23 women and 32 men participants. In the research, a questionnaire form consisting of quantitative and qualitative questions prepared by the researcher was used as the data collection tool. 58.2% of the participants state that men and women referees have equal rights in the karate branch; 50.9% stated that there were women referees in their respective commissions. In addition, 43.6% emphasized the numerical scarcity of women referees in their countries. Considering the analysis of the equality in sport and women five different outputs are given. The results of this study are thought to contribute to a better understanding of the participation of women in karate refereeing positions in all countries of the world.

**Keywords:** Woman, gender, (in)equity, referee, world karate.

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## INTRODUCTION

As in business life, the presence of women is increasing day by day in the sports community. Although cultural and social attitudes towards the determination of the jobs attributed to women and men differ from country to country, they create occupational sex segregation (Wirth, 2001). In addition to this, women have more than one role in fact. They play the role of mother at home, are in the position of employee or manager in business life, and have roles such as athletes, coaches or referees in the sports community.

Considering the studies in the literature, sport is one of the indispensable parts of education life (Anın, 1991; Özbudun, 2007; Çavuşoğlu et al., 2020). Sport is the educational tool of the body and soul, and the mind as well (Kerkez, 2012). Yetim (2005) considers sport as a wide spectrum, which ranges from entertainment, recreation, physical health, socialization and professionalization, and involves multiple fields of activity. In addition, sport and participation in sport are also versatile. Sport is a recreative activity, an amateur or a professional branch and the whole of the branches

interested by individuals in a wide variety of occupation types such as coaching, refereeing, etc. One of the sports branches is karate, which is an individual sports branch. Karate plays an important role in personality development, as well as improving the body physically. One of the most important indicators of this is the athletes' salute to the sports field called dojo, tatami that is the surface on which bouts take place, their competitors, referees and coaches (Türkeri, 2007). Contrary to popular prevalence, karate is defined as a defensive martial art, not offensive (Doğan, 2003). As in all other sports branches, karate is professionally practiced with athletes, coaches, fans, and referees who manage the bout process. Referees are the people who are determined by the relevant federations in sports organizations and manage the competition within the framework of the rules. A referee is described as the person who has the knowledge of game rules, communication and evaluation skills (Ünsal, 2005). Referees try to conduct games smoothly and successfully within the framework of the rules established by the

federation without being psychologically affected by supporters and the atmosphere in the environment while taking their decisions. Decision-making is an important component of a referee's performance in the game, and each decision has a direct impact on the potential outcome of the game (Paradis et al., 2016).

It is known that the roles of women as authorities in sports communities is lower compared to men, and the studies investigating the reason for this exhibit similar results. Tingle et al. (2014) interviewed eight former female basketball officials from five states in the United States and asked them to describe their workplace experiences so as to explore the shortage of female sport officials in their study titled "Experiences of former women officials and the impact on the sporting community". In the study conducted with the phenomenological approach, it was revealed that women quit their duties due to the social inequality felt. In this environment of inequality described by the participants, four major factors are mentioned; lack of mutual respect, perceived inequity of policies, lack of role modeling and mentoring from female officials and experiencing more gendered abuse than their male counterparts. Although women have taken great steps in terms of participation in sport, it is vital to understand the roles of women, especially as a manager, in order to achieve social equality in the sports community, in accordance with the results of the studies on gender in sport.

Looking at the studies in the literature, it is seen that issues are frequently addressed in terms of leadership and participation of women in sport. Especially regarding the obstacles and difficulties faced by women in the branch of football (Abakay and Kuru, 2013; Baştuğ et al., 2016; Ben-Porat, 2009; Engin et al., 2019; Fielding-Lloyd and Meân, 2011; Özkar, 2018; Öztürk and Koca, 2018), relevant studies are available. This great interest in football is due to the popularity of this sport, but, although other sports are not as popular as football - one of the main reasons for this is that football is a sports branch which has a market in the world - women's performance in different sports branches is also remarkable. When the popularity of the karate branch is analyzed, it is seen that 199 countries from five continents provided participation within the World Karate Federation (WKF). This increasing interest is not only on the basis of athletes, but is also reflected on the audience, coaches and therefore referees. As emphasized by the WKF, refereeing for the karate branch is defined as follows; "The Referees are a fundamental part of Karate as a sport. The evaluation of the different actions, the quality of the performance, the fair play and the strict compliance with the Rules make possible that the discipline stays aligned with the previously defined competition scenario" (WKF, 2020).

Despite the increasing diversity of sports events, women's struggle against the discrimination encountered in male-dominated professions and in competitive working environments are very valuable (Burton et al.

2011; Sartore and Sagas 2006). Researching women's problems in education, health, law, politics, business and sports life, supporting them and adapting in these researches are among the primary targets, and support of women authorities on this issue is also important (Guzel, 2015; Özbey and Guzel, 2011). Starting from experiences is known to be one of the best methods to understand a phenomenon. In this regard, this study aims to address the opinions and thoughts related to being a "female referee" in terms of gender variable based on the professional experiences of the male and female referees who actively referee in the World Karate Federation. This study will make it possible to get very important information about professional life experiences and the issue of gender equality in karate sport thanks to the opinions obtained through the questionnaire consisting of quantitative and qualitative questions answered by 55 world and continental karate referees. Sport, which is a strong social and cultural institution, needs more and more qualified women roles. It is thought that women in more visible and higher positions in the sports society have comprehensive effects such as contributing to conducting researches on the subjects like discrimination at the workplace and gender equality / inequality.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research model

The mixed-method was used in the research. Combining that means mixed-method sampling strategies may be more appropriate to the aims of implementation research to provide more understandable of the research problems like in this study (Palinkas et al., 2015; Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2014).

### Study group

The study group of the research consists of 23 (41.8%) female and 32 (58.2%) male participants that corresponds to a total of 55 continental and world Karate referee and who voluntarily participated in the study determined by convenience sampling methods, which is one of the non-random sampling methods. 38 European, 9 Asian, 4 African, 3 American (north and south) and 1 Oceania continental Karate referees participated in this research. Descriptive statistics about the participants were presented in Table 1.

When Table 1 was examined, it was observed that 41.8% (f = 23) of the participants were female and 58.2% (f = 32) were male. When the distributions were analyzed in terms of marital status, it was determined that 21.8% were single, never married; 61.8% were married, 9.1% were separated and 7.3% were others. When participants

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics (percentage, frequency and means, prevalence scales).

Variables	Groups	f	%	Total
Gender	Female	23	41.8	
	Male	32	58.2	
Age	18-25	2	3.6	
	26-35	9	16.4	
	36-45	21	38.2	
	46-55	16	29.1	
	56-64	4	7.3	
	56+	3	5.5	
Marital Status	Single. never married	12	21.8	55
	Married	34	61.8	
	Separated	5	9.1	
	Other	4	7.3	
Education Status	High School	11	20.0	
	Bachelor	17	30.9	
	Master's Degree	24	43.6	
	Doctoral Degree	3	5.5	
Karate Referee	0-5 years	3	5.5	
	6-10 years	14	25.5	
	11-15 years	9	16.4	
	16-20 years	15	27.3	
	20 years and above	14	25.5	

from karate referees are evaluated according to their educational status, it was determined that 20% were high school; 30.9% were bachelor degree; 43.6% were master's degree and 5.5% were doctoral degree. When the career years of Karate referees are evaluated, it was seen that 5.5% were 0 to 5 years; 25.5% were 6-10 years; 16.4% were 16 to 20 years; 25.5% were 20 years and above.

### Data collection tools

In the research, a questionnaire form consisting of quantitative and qualitative questions prepared by the researcher was used as the data collection tool. The aim of the research was carried out on the internet access system as it was shaped with karate referees worldwide. The online interview form consists of the questions prepared by the researcher - who is also World Karate women referee - regarding the literature review and determination of the current situation. The interview form presented to the expert opinion was revised with feedback and made ready for implementation by the researcher. The participants from the five continent were reached via the web platform and a program providing online data was used as the data collection method.

### Data analysis

Statistical package program was used in the analysis of quantitative data. The arithmetic mean, standard deviation, frequency, minimum, and maximum values were used in statistical representations of the data. In the analysis of qualitative data, descriptive and content analysis method was used and open-coding was performed (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2018). Nvivo 10 package program was used to model the analysis of qualitative data. Cohen's Kappa statistics was used to determine the consistency among evaluations made by two coders. Fleiss's kappa coefficient is a statistical method that measures the reliability of the comparative match among more than two constant numbers of raters (Cohen et al., 2007). In the research, the rejected and accepted codes were calculated by placing in the Cohen kappa formula:

$$k = \frac{p_o - p_e}{1 - p_e}$$

In the study, the Cohen kappa coefficient was determined as  $r = 0.92$  as the concordance among the coders. Therefore, the calculated values show that there is a very perfect agreement of concordance among the raters.

## FINDINGS

In this part of the study, the analysis results and comments of the quantitative and qualitative data obtained are included.

### Findings regarding quantitative data

Table 2 presents the findings of Karate referees on the topic of gender equality under the title of women referees.

When Table 2 is examined, 58.2% of the participants state that male and female referees have equal rights in the karate branch; 50.9% stated that there were women referees in their respective commissions. In addition, 43.6% emphasized the numerical scarcity of female referees in their countries.

Table 3 presents findings on how "women referees" are defined from view of the international Karate referees.

When the analysis results are examined participants (international women and male Karate referees) evaluated the women karate referees as like these; 58.2% attractive, 54.5% athletic, 45.5% feminine, 40% dominant, 54.5% role model, 65.5% integral, 72.1% courageous and 74.52% of them consider it common sense. In addition, 45.5% stated that they are not emotional.

Table 4 presents findings on how "men referees" are defined from view of the international Karate referees.

When the analysis results are examined participants (international women and male Karate referees) evaluated the men karate referees as like these; 49.1% athletic, 45.5% masculine, 47.3% dominating, 54.5% a role model, 56.4% integral, 61.8% courageous and 60% of them consider them common sense. In addition, 45.5% of the participants stated that they are not attractive and 60% of them are not emotional.

When Tables 3 and 4 are analyzed, it is seen that the emphasis is given that male and women karate referees are not emotional.

### Findings regarding qualitative data

Considering the analysis of the data obtained, the views of the participants were determined in five different outputs in the question about "Do you have any opinions about equality in sport and women? If so what are they?" (Table 5). To this question, 25 out of 55 referees stated that women have an egalitarian attitude in sports.

Analyses related to the equality in sport and women are given in Figure 1.

Some participant preferences for these outputs are given below:

*"Diferent cultures and religions have diferent view of women. If we all see women and men as*

*equal the problem will disapear" (P1).*

*"Higher standard in education of referees. Make referee job professional and to be payed for ther work if they do good job"(P2).*

*"Always try to have even number of gender" (P9).*

*"Improve referee quality" (P10).*

*"Avoiding any politics in the sport" (P19).*

*"A Referee should have a neutral gender. In my opinion, a Referee should be valued by his/her qualities to develop tasks as such, without consideration if it's a woman or a man" (P39).*

*"For my opinion one of the main thing to make this noble sport fair, specially for judging issues is to have transparent evaluation in exam, competition, participating in National Federation equally and fairly" (P54).*

It was reached to nine different outputs as a result of the analysis of the question "What do you think are the characteristic features of women referees?" question directed to the participants (Table 6). 22 of the 55 referees did not express an opinion on the characteristics of female referees.

Analyses related to the characteristic features of women referees are given in Figure 2.

Some participant preferences for these outputs are given below:

*"As a female Referee you have to be exceptionally outstanding to be somewhere close to a male referee specially in a country like in my country. But if you do reach close or maybe better, but you never get what you actually deserve or are worth it. But people do look up at you as a role model but never give you your due share. This is the irony of being a female Referee" (P17).*

*"It takes much more work, commitement and pressure just because it is still a world of men where they have the last word to say. female referees still have no voice in this world, we are just there to do our job, that's it" (P25).*

*"Beeing a female referee feels like in the center of attention" (P29).*

*"Being a female referee in my country like looking needle in hayloft. Because They have not equal oppurtinities in my country and they want to their best without any support from any others" (P33).*

*"I think that female referees are the best because they are serious, strong, neutral and very prepared" (P37).*

*"being a female referee" looks like a sturdy flower. Because women are individuals who can cope with difficulties but do not put their emotions back" (P44).*

**Table 2.** Gender equality for women referees.

Variables		Frequency	Percent (%)
Do you think that women referees and men referees have equal opportunities in Karate?	Yes	32	58.2
	No	6	10.9
	Maybe	6	10.9
	Not enough	11	20.0
	Total	55	100.0
Is the proportion of women referees sufficient in your country?	Yes	14	25.5
	No	24	43.6
	Not enough	17	30.9
	Total	55	100.0
Are the women referees in your country adequately involved in your arbitration boards? (eg; referee commission)	Yes	28	50.9
	No	15	27.3
	Not enough	12	21.8
	Total	55	100.0

**Table 3.** Findings regarding the identification of women referees.

Variables		Frequency	Percent (%)	Total
Attractive	Yes	32	<b>58.2</b>	<b>55</b>
	No	6	10.9	
	Maybe	6	10.9	
	Not enough	11	20.0	
Athletic	Yes	30	<b>54.5</b>	
	No	12	21.8	
	Not sure	13	23.6	
Emotional	Yes	18	32.7	
	No	25	<b>45.5</b>	
	Not sure	12	21.8	
Feminine	Yes	25	<b>45.5</b>	
	No	15	27.3	
	Not sure	15	27.3	
Dominating	Yes	22	<b>40.0</b>	
	No	18	32.7	
	Not sure	15	27.3	
A Role Model	Yes	30	<b>54.5</b>	
	No	10	18.2	
	Not sure	15	27.3	
Integral	Yes	36	<b>65.5</b>	
	No	1	1.8	
	Not sure	18	32.7	
Courageous	Yes	40	<b>72.7</b>	
	No	5	9.1	
	Not sure	10	18.2	
Common Sense	Yes	41	<b>74.5</b>	
	No	4	7.3	
	Not sure	10	18.2	

**Table 4.** Findings regarding the identification of men referees.

<b>Variables</b>		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Attractive	Yes	17	30.9	<b>55</b>
	No	25	<b>45.5</b>	
	Not sure	13	23.6	
Athletic	Yes	27	<b>49.1</b>	
	No	17	30.9	
	Not sure	11	20.0	
Emotional	Yes	7	12.7	
	No	33	<b>60.0</b>	
	Not sure	15	27.3	
Masculine	Yes	29	<b>52.7</b>	
	No	19	34.5	
	Not sure	7	12.7	
Dominating	Yes	26	<b>47.3</b>	
	No	13	23.6	
	Not sure	16	29.1	
A Role Model	Yes	30	<b>54.5</b>	
	No	7	12.7	
	Not sure	18	32.7	
Integral	Yes	31	<b>56.4</b>	
	No	5	9.1	
	Not sure	19	34.5	
Courageous	Yes	34	<b>61.8</b>	
	No	11	20.0	
	Not sure	10	18.2	
Common sense	Yes	33	<b>60.0</b>	
	No	7	12.7	
	Not sure	15	27.3	

**Table 5.** Opinions of referees about "equality in sport and women".

<b>Category</b>	<b>Participants (P)</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
Gender	1, 9, 11, 14, 18, 20, 23, 24, 25, 28, 33, 39, 44, 48	14	25.45
Education	2, 4, 10, 46, 47	5	9.09
Justice	3, 19, 40, 54	4	7.27
Positive discrimination	8, 37, 43, 55	4	7.27
Professionalism	6, 12, 45	3	5.45

*"Professional and interested in furthering the sport of karate, personal aspirations, and providing leadership in representing not only the best in the karate world but also providing a*

*voice and opportunity for female officials and athletes" (P45).*

*"Being a woman referee is difficult and they have to work more than the male ones" (P55).*

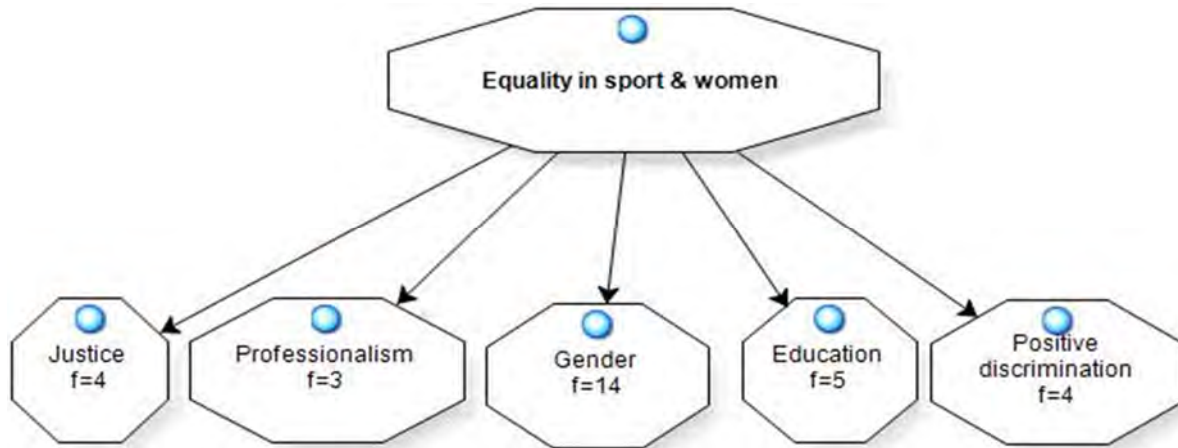


Figure 1. Equality in sport and women.

Table 6. Characteristic features of women referees.

Characteristic features		Participants (P)	f	%
Characteristics of women karate referees	Equality	1, 7, 15, 26, 27, 38	6	10.9
	Challenging	9, 20, 23, 39, 49, 55	6	10.9
	Brave	11,16, 30, 37, 47, 54	6	10.9
	Opportunity to be offered	3, 33, 40, 45	4	7.27
	Diligent	12, 13, 25, 34	4	7.27
	Responsible & Crisis manager	10, 22, 35, 44	4	7.27
	Nigging & Role model	17,18, 36	3	5.45
	Successful	19, 41, 50	3	5.45
	Striking	6, 27, 29	3	5.45

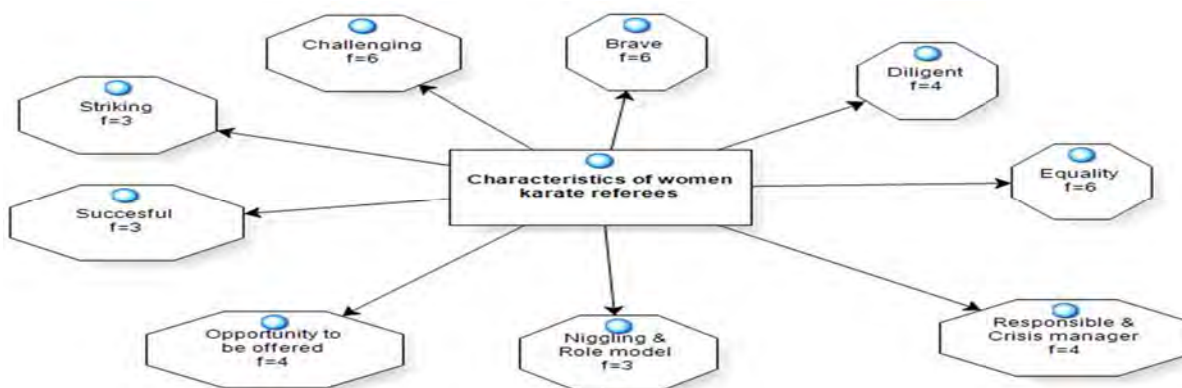


Figure 2. Characteristic features of women referees.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Gender equality in sport has been an issue emphasized for a while now (Cunningham, 2008). The International Olympic Committee (IOC), which is described as the top

head organization in sport in this regard, is committed to gender equality in sport. The Olympic Charter states that: "The IOC's role is to encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures with a view to implementing the principle of

equality of men and women" (Olympic Charter, 2013). Although the participation of women in all of the sports branches has not reached the desired level, there are social and political pressures to increase the participation of women. Gender discrimination is observed very sharply in the area of sport (Messner, 1988). Participation of women in sports activities is considered to be inadequate, especially as managers and decision makers (Burton et al. 2011; Walker and Bopp, 2010), and sports environments dominated by men are criticized in this respect (Cunningham, 2008; Sartore and Cunningham, 2007). It is seen in many sports branches that women achieve successful results with the awareness of their responsibilities in their jobs and there are many women coaches, referees and managers who struggle to have equal opportunities. It is necessary, thanks to these researches, to make the struggle visible and to raise awareness such as increasing the participation of women in sport, keeping their positions higher and better understanding of women who struggle against injustice.

Considering the components of sport, there are different variables such as coaches, technical team, managers and referees besides athletes. It is seen in this structure that the male-female balance is quantitatively dominated by men. For this reason, this study addressed female referees of the karate branch, which is an Olympic sports branch and accepted by many countries in the world, and the opinions and thoughts related to being a "female referee" in the world were analyzed in terms of gender variable based on the professional experiences of the male and female referees who actively referee within the World Karate Federation. Accordingly, the opinions of referees from five different continents and countries were consulted.

In this research when one of the result is examined, 50.9% stated that there were women referees in their respective commissions. In addition, 43.6% emphasized the numerical scarcity of female referees in their countries. When we analysed the literature (Kane and Stangl, 1991; Norman, 2010; Passero et al., 2019; Sartore and Cunningham, 2007) we see similar results. It has suggested that women have been marginalized, discriminated against and undervalued in workplace leadership positions in sports.

In this the analysis results are examined participants (international women and male Karate referees) evaluated the women karate referees as like these; 58.2% attractive, 54.5% athletic, 45.5% feminine, 40% dominant, 54.5% role model, 65.5% integral, 72.1% courageous and 74.52% of them consider it common sense. In addition, 45.5% stated that they are not emotional. The question regarding the characteristics of the referees was directed for the male referees. When the analysis results are examined participants (international women and male karate referees) evaluated the men karate referees as like these; 49.1% athletic, 45.5% masculine, 47.3% dominating, 54.5% a role model, 56.4% integral, 61.8% courageous and 60%

of them consider them common sense. In addition, 45.5% of the participants stated that they are not attractive and 60% of them are not emotional. When studies in the literature are examined (Burton et al., 2011; Passero et al., 2019; Sartore, 2007), the power and privilege given to men confirms that masculinity in sports continues to marginalize women at almost all levels. One of the results of this data is that, as determined in this research, women referees experience a lack of role models. It can be said that this situation is still quantitatively caused by the high male participant in sports.

In a study by Kilty (2006), four obstacles female coaches face are mentioned; unequal competence assumptions, recruitment based on similarity principle, homophobia and lack of female mentors. According to this study, there is a wrong assumption that male coaches are more competent than female coaches. That is why a female coach always needs to prove herself. This study also has a similar finding coherent with the literature. In the results obtained regarding the characteristic features of female referees, the participants' views refer four similar obstacles. In this case, it can be said that women need more to prove themselves not only in coaching but also in refereeing in sport than male individuals. The literature has the studies on that lack of female role models can discourage young girls from following the leadership positions in sport (Passero et al., 2019; Walker and Bopp, 2010). This result corresponds to the findings of the study on female refereeing in karate. Although the mentioned obstacles were evaluated in the context of coaching, it can be thought that the same restrictions are encountered by women in other components of sport such as refereeing, mentoring, and management. In short, the underlying reasons for sexist approaches in sport are the concepts that relate management or authority with male domination and as a consequence, women have difficulty in disproving these claims as they are under pressure while displaying their sports behavior (Forbes et al., 2015; Jones and Edwards, 2013; Norman, 2010).

Although the perception of refereeing is good for women in some countries, this positive situation may vary in some societies due to social structure differences, cultural structures and gender approaches. Therefore, it is important to execute studies on women's participation in sport in different sports branches, different contexts and different positions. This study, which focuses on female referees in the karate branch, is therefore of unique value. A point thought to increase the importance of this study is that not only the opinions of female referees but the opinions of male participants were consulted in the study to emphasize gender equality. The results of this study are thought to contribute to a better understanding of the participation of women in karate refereeing positions in all countries of the world, the discussion about gender equality in sport, the access of female referees in karate to opportunities, and discussions about stereotyped structures in sport.



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## Disclosure statement:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Ethical clearance

Ethics are the rules of conduct in research (Walliman, 2006). That is especially important when conducting research with humans. The major principle for making sure that no harm is done to any participants in the research. Also as this was not an interventional study, 'permission form' and 'voluntary confirmation letter' were taken from all the participants. Informed consent of participants was obtained and they were at liberty to participate and withdraw voluntarily. I also ensured that their responses were anonymous and confidential.

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