

Women in Martial Arts Roundtable No. 1: Why Don't More Women and Girls Study Martial Arts?

Martial arts promises to provide important tools and practical skills for self-defense, particularly for women and girls. Yet, participation in martial arts continues to be dominated by men, raising at least two questions: what role does martial arts play in self-defense and why aren't more women and girls studying martial arts? To answer these questions and others, SR Staley (www.srstaley.com) convened a roundtable discussion with six highly experienced female martial artists in October 2012 to discuss the role of women in martial arts as part of a broader discussion on violence, self-defense, and martial arts. Brief bios of the participants are included at the end of this interview. The following responses were prompted by the question: Why don't more women and girls study martial arts?

Discussion moderated and edited by SR Staley

RUMIKO HAYES: I think the major reason more women and girls do not study martial arts is the cultural environment. When girls hear the word "martial arts," they think it is for men. Traditionally, it *was* for men. They were the ones who went out to fight to protect their loved ones, their village, and their country. Women stayed behind and took care of the family. Women played a different role.

Now, when I mention that I am a martial arts practitioner, I get statements from women like: "Wow, that's cool; I wish I could do that!" But why don't girls enroll in a martial arts school? They may associate martial arts with time, discipline and commitment. I hear many reasons: they may think they are not strong enough to do that; they may think that they will get hurt; they may not want to sweat; they may think their boyfriends or husbands are there to protect them; they may think information like "one of three women goes through their life being the victim of sexual abuse" does not apply to them. Many think abuse will not happen to them.

LAURA GIANCARLO: At this point in our culture's evolution it still isn't as acceptable for women as it is for men to present themselves as strong. What I mean by that is women are not expected to be strong in any aspect of our nature including physically,

emotionally, mentally, or even spiritually. Often times when these qualities are exhibited by a female they are quickly chastised, ridiculed, or punished as a result. I think girls are still encouraged to utilize other qualities to get ahead in life such as using their natural caretaker qualities and their ability to be harmonizers. There are certainly other qualities that girls are encouraged to use, such as the use of their bodies through sex.

Care-taking and harmonizing are definitely important in leading a successful life, and to balance these qualities out with the strength to physically protect oneself is really ideal. Without the ability to protect oneself, well, we limit our choices. I have had many conversations where more than one woman has asked me: "Oh, you do karate?" I ask them about trying it out, and they respond with "Oh, I don't do that." I have often replied back that I was confused, and asked them: "So, you don't protect yourself when you need to? Like when you are physically threatened?" Then they become very confused.

These women don't realize that they would be at the mercy of their attacker because they made a choice in the past to not participate in something that could potentially save their lives.

Women in Martial Arts Roundtable No. 1: Why Don't More Women and Girls Study Martial Arts?

I am not sure why women respond to martial arts this way, but I think it goes back to our teaching girls that they aren't supposed to fight. Well, no one is *supposed* to fight, but people do and it is our personal responsibility to be able to protect ourselves. Mrs. Hayes is correct in saying that they believe that it is up to someone else like their husband or boyfriend to protect them. That's a pretty heavy burden to place on someone that we love. Again, I am not sure that a lot of women see it as their responsibility.

KRISS HURDLE: I just asked my 10-year old daughter, who also studies martial arts and is a soccer player extraordinaire, why she thought more boys train than girls—she said: “Because the boys automatically think it’s cool and the girls are scared.” She followed that up with “the girls are scared of a lot of things, like when they get a cut, it is like, oooohh, and drama.”

MARY STEVENS: Yes, yes, and yes. I agree with everyone that a major issue is that public perception plays a major role. I talk to so many moms who bring in their sons but are almost horrified by the idea of the girls doing martial arts. “No, they do dance/gymnastics. They wouldn’t be interested in self-defense.” My own mom told me I couldn’t take karate in middle school because it wasn’t for girls. I was allowed to do field hockey, tennis, swimming, and softball. Her self-defense advice when I went to college was “if a boy gets fresh with you, throw up on him.” While I’m mega impressed that my mom can puke on command, I really didn’t think it was a good (or ladylike) strategy. I think many women inherit this way of thinking from their moms and pass it on to their daughters.

THERESA MURPHY: Women also do not talk about the violence that happens to them because so often it is personal and they find it difficult to talk about or afraid of the reactions that may follow. This contributes to the lack of awareness and realness of the violence that can and does affect women. October is national Domestic Violence awareness month. It is also national breast cancer awareness month. We are swathed in pink ribbons, shirts, ads, fundraisers, walks, runs, bike rides, personnel stories from everyday people and celebrities alike in how breast cancer has affected their life. What have you heard about domestic violence? Breast cancer affects one in eight women. Domestic violence affects one in three. Most women are much more aware of breast cancer and what to do than violence.

TORI ELDRIDGE: I think it might be interesting to consider two questions in regards to why more girls and women don’t train in the martial arts: What do girls/women enjoy doing? what do girls/women feel prevented from doing? You see, I think there are many females out there who are brave, committed and athletic but simply would not enjoy the type of physical activity, interaction and environment that we all enjoy in martial arts. And you know what? I think that’s okay. There are lots of activities that would improve me physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually that I would not enjoy, or at least not enough for me to dedicate my time, efforts and resources. Training to climb Mt. Everest would definitely fit the bill. But, hey...not for me. While I believe, wholeheartedly, in the benefits of martial arts, I also acknowledge that there are many ways to get from here to there—and that “there” is also a matter of personal perception.

Women in Martial Arts Roundtable No. 1: Why Don't More Women and Girls Study Martial Arts?

I also don't think there's anything wrong with more females participating in dance, cheerleading and gymnastics, and fewer participating in hockey, football, basketball, etc. All of those "more female" activities involve a broad range of body movement, grace and athleticism. They also require grit, courage and commitment. I know because I've done all three. Well, truth be told, I didn't get involved with cheerleading until I coached a varsity team at my son's high school. (*laughs*) But hey...I demanded commitment!

My point is that there are activities that females tend to enjoy that still elevate us—and that's okay. We don't need to participate in typically male sports to achieve this. I'd also like to add that there is such a strong male presence in dance, cheer and gymnastics, and such a strong female presence in other sports, that I think those stereotypes are already dissolving. Yay for that!

So, I think the more relevant question is not how to turn females away from the things females like to do, but rather how can we make martial arts more inviting for females to consider?

MURPHY: From a very young age girls are influenced by Disney heroines being saved by their prince. Until Mulan, none of them defended or saved themselves. Even in modern literature and entertainment, many heroines are rescued by the "prince." Superman keeps getting remade with Lois Lane rescued once again. In the teen Twilight series Bella is helpless until she herself becomes a vampire. As a woman, she was helpless and relied on the men around her to keep her safe. The Hunger Games has a strong female character but

when it came to physical fights she was weaker and only survived due to someone else's intervention. These are just a few examples; there are many more.

Still to this day in sports the term "you did that like a girl" is used as an insult and I have heard it aimed at both boys and girls. It is a term I heard used in a karate studio I used to train in.

GIANCARLO: I also feel that there is an imbalance in how girls learn to be strong in our society. As Theresa pointed out, our culture is littered with images of weak and helpless females. But I would also point out that there are many images of strong girls and women as well. The media has become filled with strong women. Law and Order, CSI, NCIS, The Avengers, X-men, Hermione from the Harry Potter series, and all have strong women who are clearly capable of taking care of themselves. These are examples of varying degrees of strength (and morality) that can, and I assume do, serve as inspiration for our girls.

There are also examples of girls and women who go about being strong in a very physically destructive and spiritually harmful way. Just take a look at any of these so called reality shows such as Jersey Shore and Bad Girls. The media understands that these characters are extreme and that they can attract a lot of attention so these shows are promoted in a way that they will attract the most vulnerable target audience, our young people. I find this tragic. It seems that we live in a culture of extremes that accepts only weakness and helplessness or out of control violence.

MURPHY: The majority of martial arts are for men and taught by men. The martial arts

Women in Martial Arts Roundtable No. 1: Why Don't More Women and Girls Study Martial Arts?

address violence men face and how they respond to it. It is very much a male-oriented culture and sport. That does not mean that women are not welcome; however, we must learn and play by their [male] rules and their reality of violence. The male orientation of the martial arts world doesn't mean women can't participate—they can—but there are limits as to how successful and far we can go.

This is true even for men. As they age; having to train in MMA, Krav Maga or some of the other extremely physical arts becomes more difficult if not impossible. It is even more so for women. If anything these arts help solidify the belief that women cannot defend themselves.

GIANCARLO: Theresa pointed out extreme sports such as MMA and I would say that these sports are not good for the martial arts industry in terms of reaching to a broad market. I think that the brutality of the sport only serves to turn people away, especially women and girls. It communicates that you have to be broken and bloody if you want to be successful at training in a martial art.

STEVENS: Having female instructors really helps. Not just because of the physical identification (hips and breasts influence how we move and what we protect) but because women tend to think and emote differently. We tend to use more emotional intelligence which doesn't thrive in a "macho bozo dojo".

GIANCARLO: I also think that there aren't enough female instructors out there for girls to be inspired by. I was lucky in that when I started training many years ago Mrs. Hayes was on the path far ahead of me. I could see that it could be done because she was modeling it for me. The lack of instructors

might also be a matter of exposure. Women who are successful in the field may not be getting the visibility that would be required to create a change in our culture's perception of their role in martial arts.

HURDLE: How to get more girls interested in training? In our dojo, I think it's a grass-roots effort. We have done marketing that targets women, but, when a girl brings a friend to a "bring a friend class" we have a better chance of getting them to enroll. "I can do this" is our creed in action. And yes, it helps to have a women owner, but that doesn't matter until they walk into the school.

We can offer other profit centers to extend the comfort zone to more women through yoga class, Reiki, etc. and hope to get a trickle-down effect. You may get a few, but certainly you (as an owner) will spend more time doing what isn't your core offering. I'm not sure it is the best use of time and energy in hopes you may get a person who wasn't committed to the martial arts in the first place (but as the owner you chose, or not, to roll the dice for various reasons).

So, today, I am going to do what we do—teach great classes, make sure everyone is safe (men and women), teach both of my kids about awareness, and make sure I give our women the tips and tricks they need to make individual moments work for them. But honestly, I would do that for everyone on the mat; it's part of what makes our approach to martial arts unique and Newbury Park Martial Arts Center's exceptional service.

GIANCARLO: I think that another reason that women don't get involved in martial arts is that a lot of people see martial arts as a recreation event designed for our

Women in Martial Arts Roundtable No. 1: Why Don't More Women and Girls Study Martial Arts?

children. It's where we drop our kids off to get some exercise and to learn self-discipline. These activities are all important aspects of being healthy individuals, but not seen as something for adults. Now, I am respectful of other styles of martial arts, but the fact that a lot of the schools cater to children and often run day-care type environments probably hasn't helped people to see that there really are important skills that adults can learn from attending a reputable martial arts center.

STEVENS: I really loathe the term "martial arts" because of what it conjures up in the brain but I've never found a better phrase. I wish I could get through to more women that the inner peace they are looking for in yoga is reinforced by the interpersonal training in a comprehensive martial art like To-Shin Do. There's something so special about being able to test it out in a supportive, encouraging environment.

HAYES: I really appreciate that everyone has taken their time to share these thoughts. I agree with Mary about the term "martial arts." It limits the participation of women and girls immediately.

Compare this to comments I heard from our own female students after enrolling in our school:

- I have learned that I can grow....at any age.
- I have learned that I can change ...at any age
- I have learned that I can break limits....at any age.
- I have learned that I can increase my self-confidence at any age.

How we reach those who have not found the way to "more elevated me" is the challenge that we are facing.

ELDRIDGE: I think there are women who live in fear, doubt and limitations who yearn for what we have in To-Shin Do but fear to take the steps to get it. In these cases the terminology of "martial arts" is very intimidating, as Rumiko and Mary have mentioned. And I absolutely agree with Laura and Theresa that the brutality of MMA and Krav Maga is not only unappealing to women but downright horrifying.

MURPHY: I think Mrs. Hayes has just given us the marketing material! We need to emphasize that martial arts teaches us "how to reach the more elevated me." You can grow, change, break limits, increase self-confidence at *any* age.

I think so often in this society we are ready and willing to submit ourselves to what is seen as appropriate for our age, gender, ancestral culture, race, religion etc. Laura brought up the strong women characters in our culture. But frequently, just as Hermione from Harry Potter, they are ridiculed for brains in their younger years and then lauded for it in maturity. I believe this is echoed in our society today. As Mary pointed out there are many families who still raise boys to do football, hockey, karate, etc. and girls gymnastics, dance, cheerleading. There are so many levels of submission by women and girls; many are self-given so innocently and led by good intentions. It's tough to unravel.

HURDLE: I want to throw a wild hair into the thought process (and then get back to the "girls training" question): Why don't more *people* train in a deep art such as To-Shin Do? Growing, changing, breaking habits, defending themselves (against others if needed and against self-doubt for sure) is

Women in Martial Arts Roundtable No. 1: Why Don't More Women and Girls Study Martial Arts?

what I want for both my son and daughter. At times, I am really not sure my daughter has the “girl disadvantage”—my son is the soft-hearted one, my daughter just as soft hearted, but stubborn as an ox (a typical red head). Both will face stereo-typical challenges.

In fact, just this past weekend, we were talking with my son about football (he is playing tackle for the first time). He really enjoys the “game of football” but not the “culture of football,” where so many of the knucklehead young athletes think it isn't “cool” that he is an honors student and in student government. Can he be in both worlds? An athlete and smart?

So all this leads me to constantly challenge our marketing and branding. Why don't people rush to our product when, yes, there are many paths to self-expression, but few with “scientifically proven” depth and methodology for success (well beyond the physical self-defense which is awesome)? Because To-Shin Do, and martial arts more generally, just isn't for everyone; it never will be.

ELDRIDGE: I really like this set of statements from Rumiko because I think it targets issues that are important to women.

- I have learned that I can grow....at any age.
- I have learned that I can change ...at any age
- I have learned that I can break limits....at any age.
- I have learned that I can increase my self-confidence at any age

Having said that, I doubt it would have attracted me back in the day. I came into the martial arts because I wanted to be a warrior in the masculine sense of the word—*toe-to-toe, punch-for-punch*. I liked the world of men, the fighting, the sweat, the grit, the honesty. (*Laughs*) Perhaps some of you did, too (and still do). As I got older (and more experienced), my goals and source of enjoyment changed. But it was a very empowering and fun stage to experience. Anyway, gritty gals like me will find their own way into the martial arts without our help. The question regarding them becomes: How do we get those gritty gals to come to us?

About the Participants

- SR Staley (moderator): SR Staley is an award-winning author of young-adult and middle grade novels. Most recently, he has authored *A Warrior's Soul and Renegade*, action/adventure stories that address urban violence and self-defense using a martial arts theme and perspective. He is the father of two teenage children.
- Rumiko Hayes is a native of Japan and co-founder with Stephen K. Hayes of the martial art of To-Shin Do (www.skhquest.com). Their affiliated schools have graduated more than 1,000 black belts since its founding in 1997. A long-time student of Ninjutsu Grandmaster Masaaki Hatsumi, she is also the mother of two grown children, both female, who have earned black belts.
- Tori Eldridge (www.torielldridge.com) is a practitioner of To-Shin Do (5th Degree black belt) and author of *Empowered Living: A Guide to Physical and Emotional Protection*

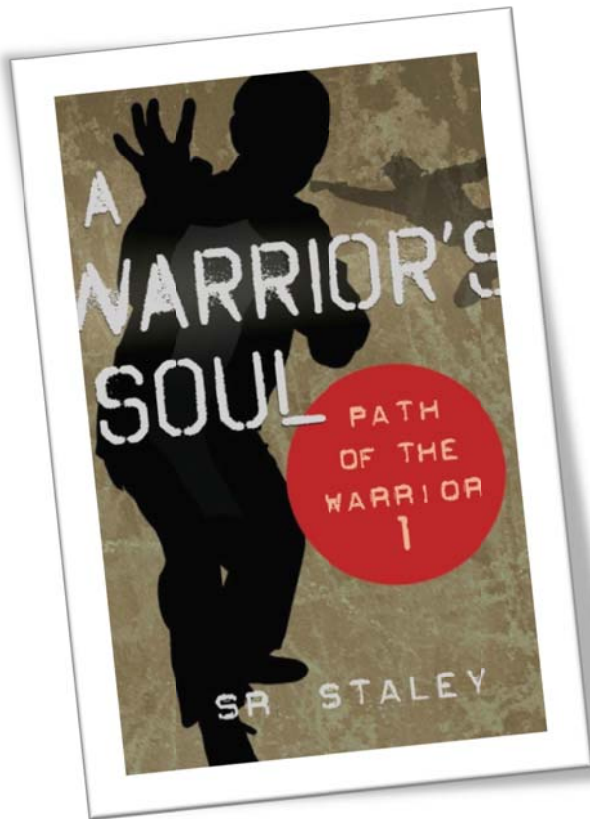
Women in Martial Arts Roundtable No. 1: Why Don't More Women and Girls Study Martial Arts?

among other works. She has a rich and varied career as an entrepreneur, teacher, actress/singer/dancer on Broadway, TV and film, a screenwriter and novelist.

- *Theresa Murphy is co-owner of Shinobi Martial Arts Center (www.shinobi-martial-arts.com) in Plaistow, New Hampshire and the mother of two teenage daughters. She has earned black belts in To-Shin Do (3rd Degree), Bujinkan Ninjutsu, and Kempo Karate (where she also served as chief instructor in her dojo). She has also studied Tae Kwon Do, Tai Chi, and Shotokan Karate. Theresa is the co-founder of the self-defense curriculum Lessons In Violence Evasion (LIVE).*
- *Laura Giancarlo has been training for the last 27 years in the various Ninja arts as well as other martial arts. She has earned black belts in To-Shin Do (5th degree), Bujinkan Ninjutsu (1st Degree), Okinawan Shorin ryu (1st degree), and Tae Kwon Do (1st degree). An athlete all her life, Laura has participated in a variety of sports including gymnastics, dance, yoga, softball, and collegiate cheerleading. She has also served as an instructor of martial arts and fitness classes. She lives with her husband in West Chapel, Florida where she enjoys teaching science to middle school students.*
- *Mary Stevens is the owner of the Quest Center for Martial Arts (www.boulderquet.com) in Boulder, Colorado, and earned her black belt in To-Shin Do (4th Degree).*
- *Kriss Hurdle co-owns Newbury Park Martial Arts Center (www.npmac.com) where she holds the title of Head Kunoichi. She is a 4th Dan in To-Shin Do and holds Black Belts in Tang Soo Do, Hapkido and Escrima. She is a Reiki Master and specializes in self-protection and self-development and energy work for women, men and children. She is a proud Mom of two and happily married for almost 18 years.*

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Available through bookstores and on-line, in print and e-book editions!



“SR Staley's gritty and gripping story brings to life the kind of dilemmas today's kids can face on a daily basis, and provides important lessons for how martial arts training can become a touchstone for how to find our way through life.”
© [Stephen K. Hayes](#), member of the Black Belt Hall of Fame, Founder, To-Shin Do Martial Arts

“A fine and exciting read for younger readers, highly recommended.” © [Midwest Book Review](#)

“Staley's novel is a fast-paced, enjoyable read that delivers not only action, but also offers insight into how martial arts training can influence young people's everyday decisions.”
© [Donna Meredith](#), author of *The Color of Lies*

“I was transported into the story.” © [Bookreviewvenue.com](#)

“Many of my students in middle school can relate to this and that is why this book is now sitting on my shelf for anyone to read.” © [Liveteachcreate.com](#)

“The story is an excellent one... The author's writing brings the story and emotion to life—fear, anger, frustration, and trying to establish a power base—[and are] poignant to any age range.” © Beck Valley Books

“My middle school students had the amazing opportunity to help proof *Renegade*. When we finished they told me that every teacher, principal and staff at a middle school should be required to read it. One of the students who is now in high school read the finished book in two days. I asked him if he still liked the book with the changes and he said, ‘No, I love it.’ This book not only grabs the attention of students because they can relate to it but also shows them a way to make things better.”

© [Charlene Irvin-Brown](#), Reading teacher, St. Cloud, Minnesota

