

Women and Martial Arts: Examining the Transformation of Society's Perception of Women Based on the Pattern of Their Participation in Martial Arts in Iran

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Introduction

Women's involvement in sports, particularly martial arts, has experienced a substantial increase in tandem with the growing awareness of health. It seems that the increasing involvement of women in martial arts has also altered society's perception of women, as femininity and sport are shaped in conjunction with the social context. It is possible that the perception of women has evolved from one that is characterized by emotion and delicacy to one that is more harsh and less delicate over time. Art, particularly cinema, can be used to analyze this transformation, as it is a reflection of social realities. In general, art can be examined from two distinct perspectives:

- a) The formative approach, which examines the influence of art on society, and
- b) The reflective approach, according to which art functions as a mirror of its contemporary society.

Consequently, this study examines the evolution of the portrayal of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema in conjunction with the increasing involvement of women in martial arts.

Methodology

The objective of this investigation was to employ narrative analysis to monitor the evolution of women's social image over two twenty-year periods (1985–2005 and 2005–2025). The examination concentrated on four critical narrative components: character, event, action, and narrator. The sequence of events is generated by characters, events are identifiable occurrences with distinct patterns, actions refer to the behaviors and states of the characters, and the narrator incorporates the cinematic techniques employed by filmmakers to convey ideology. Two films were chosen for each of the specified periods that could be regarded as representative of the era. For the initial period (1985–2005), the symbols of emotional femininity were “Mother” and “Leila.” “Mastaneh” and “Whisper my name” were chosen as representations of the evolving perception of women in society for the second period (2005–2025). Initially, the four narrative elements were employed to summarize and analyze each film internally. Consequently, an external analysis was conducted by investigating the films within the broader social context of women's participation in martial arts during the corresponding periods.

Results

Women's martial arts were mainly marginalized, and the opportunities for women to participate in sports were severely restricted during the 1980s. Women encountered substantial cultural and structural impediments to their participation in martial arts, which were perceived as predominantly masculine. The social conditions of the era are reflected in the portrayal of women in “Mother” within this context. The female character is primarily portrayed as a patient, calm, and self-sacrificing mother whose actions are restricted to the private sphere of the home. The real limitations imposed on women's participation in areas such as martial arts are reflected in the absence of an independent and socially active female character.

Despite the fact that women's martial arts began to develop incrementally in the 1990s, their participation was still restricted to educational or semi-professional environments. Female strength and mobility were not yet fully accepted, and society maintained cautious attitudes toward women's physicality. “Leila” is indicative of this transitional period, during which new opportunities for women's social and physical engagement emerged but had not yet developed into active and established agency, such as martial arts participation. Despite the fact that “Leila” reaches a point of choice and potential action, she ultimately conforms to traditional expectations.

The 2000s were a critical transition period that facilitated increased participation. Despite the persistence of cultural resistance, disciplines like taekwondo experienced significant growth, transitioning from casual practice to semi-professional and competitive levels. The social narrative surrounding female physical activity gradually changed as women began to join specialized clubs, laying the groundwork for the explosive growth of the following decade.

The decade of the 2010s was a period of great prosperity for Iranian women who were involved in martial arts. Women who wore the hijab began competing seriously in international events, the number of female martial artists increased substantially, Iran advanced in the Asian rankings, and a plethora of female champions and medalists emerged. For instance, taekwondo, which had initiated its expansion in the 1990s, experienced substantial growth in the 2000s and reached its zenith in the 2010s. Self-defense classes became increasingly popular, and more challenging disciplines, such as women’s boxing, were introduced. Martial arts transformed into a practical response to the constraints depicted in “Mastaneh,” while simultaneously challenging traditional gender roles and fostering self-confidence, stress management, and self-defense abilities. This depiction accurately captures the social climate of the decade, during which women's awareness of their rights, personal security, and independence significantly increased.

Women’s involvement in martial arts has reached an unprecedented level in the past decade, with women now making up over half of the martial arts community in the country. The sustained growth of this discipline is evidenced by the expansion of women's self-defense programs, as well as numerous international achievements and medals. Iranian women have transformed traditional perceptions of women's physical capabilities, contributing to their psychological well-being, self-confidence, and athletic success. Martial arts have become a dynamic and multifaceted domain. Simultaneously, the 2024 film “Whisper My Name” illustrates the apex of a cultural transformation: the evolution from the traditional woman to a contemporary woman who is independent and self-sufficient, yet remains gentle. She employs her physical capabilities and inner strength to establish her own identity and destiny.

Conclusion

The concurrent analysis of the evolving representation of women in society and the expansion of women's martial arts from the limited participation of the 1980s and 1990s to the substantial growth observed from the 2000s onward suggests that the social image of women underwent a significant transformation as well. The films of each era are a clear reflection of this transformation. The portrayal of women as highly vulnerable during the earlier decades has been replaced by more recent representations that emphasize qualities associated with martial arts participation, such as resilience, perseverance, competitiveness, determination, and self-confidence. A portion of this transformation is indicative of objective social changes. The films analyzed in this study reflect real societal changes, as evidenced by empirical evidence and reflection theory. Cinematic expressions of collective social imagination are another aspect that reflects shifts in public perceptions of women. As a result, certain alterations that have been portrayed in recent films may be indicative of emerging social aspirations rather than completely realized realities. In this regard, films, as works of art, not only reflect social changes but also expedite these changes by influencing their audience. In general, the increase in the number of women who engage in martial arts has had a significant impact on the representation of women in society and on the women themselves.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have conducted an independent research study for this article, and there is no conflict of interest.