

# **Fight the Good Fight: Assessment of Gender Roles and Identity in the Mixed Martial Arts Community**

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## **Introduction**

Mixed martial arts (MMA) has emerged as one of the fastest growing and most popular combat sports in recent years, drawing in millions of fans from around the world through its top company and fight promotion, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). As a relatively new sport, MMA has been subject to significant scrutiny and criticism throughout its short history, ranging from being infamously likened to “human cockfighting” by John McCain in 1996 to achieving a meteoric rise and global mass-market appeal by the 2010s (Greene) with the help of famous UFC stars with mass-market appeal such as “The Notorious” Conor McGregor and female judoka Ronda Rousey (Wyman). In this literature review, I first explore the traditional hypermasculine cultural norms that the Ultimate Fight Championship is predicated on. Then, I explore how female role models in mixed martial arts and the very act of the sport itself are used to subvert these norms and create alternative femininities within MMA culture. Lastly, I conclude by identifying a hole in the research regarding queer rights and queer expression within the current narratives in both the UFC and MMA as a whole.

## **The Construct of the Hypermasculine Within MMA**

We must begin with an understanding of the dominant narrative of masculinity as it exists within mixed martial arts. The mixed martial arts culture perpetuated by the UFC has been argued to primarily affirm hypermasculine norms; masculine attributes, in terms of gender hierarchy, are the most highly valued. This occurs in many critical ways: firstly, the UFC’s glorification of aggression and violence has served to entrench negative norms of masculinity and reinforce stereotypes of what it means to be a “real man” (Choi 17). Stars such as Conor McGregor work as vessels exemplifying dominant masculinity via their viral press coverage, prioritizing gendered ideals of competition, aggressiveness, and mental fortitude (Seira 11). Unlike his competitors, according to McGregor, “I don’t complain, I don’t bitch, I don’t moan, I get it done.” When “war is upon [him, he is] calm, cold, ruthless and ready to take out the body that’s in front of [him]” (Seira 17-18).

Furthermore, gender studies scholars posit that even the physical actions comprising mixed martial arts itself, striking opponents versus grappling with them in pursuit of a submission, create an inherently gendered and racialized dichotomy—the popularized Western masculine ideal of a fisticuffs fight at-distance ending in a knockout, versus fighters using “Eastern” judo and jiu-jitsu grappling techniques, remaining in intimate proximity with their opponents, and forcing a fight-

ending sequence with a choke or the hyperextension of a limb. (Hirose and Pih, 198-99). To fight standing up is to “fight like a man”, according to several coaches and fighters within the sport, and to submit and ‘give up’ in the face of a wrist-lock that could snap one’s arm is in fact considered a most humiliating form of defeat (Hirose and Pih, 199-200).

Thus, some frame the primary impact of MMA on the psyche of the masses as an arm of Western hegemonic masculinity. As Jacky Chan wrote in the *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, attributed to Alex Channon in 2012, “the Westernization and misappropriation of traditional martial arts have bred what is known as MMA”, shifting “the cultural status and integrity of traditional martial arts into a mostly male professional sport of excessive and masculinized violence” (100). Damningly, others find that sport’s spectacle of violence, bloodshed, racism, and toxic masculinity ultimately serve to foster appeal for fascist white-supremacist groups in America and abroad (Deng 3).

How then do we possibly find liberation within mixed martial arts culture itself? Paul Bowman’s “MMA hard men and media representation” in *Sport in History* offers a way forward: he argues that neither tales of toxic martial arts masculinity nor emancipatory narratives involving martial arts practice are rare, rather; “perhaps part of the problem—and surely one of the easiest to change—lies with the orientation of the stories being sought out, constructed, invented and told” (407). The UFC’s close relationship with sports media and reality television, as it cements itself into the cultural canon, has molded MMA into a responsive outlet of media representation (Bowman 399). Therefore, allow us to seek the liberation narratives we’d like to propagate to create a paradigm shift in the world of mixed martial arts.

## **Subversion of Gender Roles in MMA**

In 2013, “Rouseymania” took the world by storm. After Ronda Rousey, a former Olympic medalist and the youngest judoka at the 2004 Athens Olympics, was signed to the UFC as their first female fighter and inaugural champion, the promotion quickly realized they had captured lightning in a bottle. On the day of her first UFC fight, she was the most Googled person in the world, and she became “the most marketed female athlete in the world” all within that same year (Weaving 135).

In “Cage Fighting Like A Girl”, Charlene Weaving explains that Rousey was so successful both because of how the UFC’s hypermasculine culture was juxtaposed against her femininity, as well as how it complimented Rousey’s own constructed idea of her femininity in practice: “beautiful on the outside but a brother on the inside,” as described by UFC CEO Dana White in 2012. Rousey’s “aggressive and violent persona” is argued by Weaving to betray feminine norms of women being unwilling to risk harm and being fearful of their bodies’ full capacities. (134-35). This was no coincidence; rather, it’s a very intentional mode of self-expression—take it from Rousey herself, in her infamous “D.N.B.” rant during her pre-fight preparations in 2015:

“Listen, just because my body was developed for a purpose other than fucking millionaires doesn’t mean it’s masculine. I think it’s femininely badass as fuck, because there’s not a single muscle on my body that isn’t for a purpose, because I’m not a do-nothing-bitch.” (McClearen 51, UFC 2015)

Jennifer McClearen in “New Sporting Femininities” explains that this rhetoric, though clearly brash and controversial, creates a “sensibility [that] shuns notions that women are naturally inferior as athletes to men à la postfeminism and instead posits the female body as capable of impressive feats of physicality.”

The Rousey era has come and gone, and in its wake, newer female role models are transitioning into the sport and solidifying these ideas of modern femininity within mixed martial arts. Promisingly, a 2016 study in the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* found that Polish reporting on women’s strawweight UFC champion Joanna Jędrzejczyk “embrace[d] Jędrzejczyk in a de-gendered manner, celebrating her accomplishments in all their grisly detail, praising her personal qualities as an outspoken, highly confident, and supremely skilled fighter, and taking pride in the national significance of her victories” (Jakubowska 423). The authors continue by rejecting the possible hypothesis that Jędrzejczyk within this coverage is being recognized as an “honorary man”, instead positing that she “was not celebrated for being ‘masculine’ or on a par with men, but in her own right, and as a woman, for being a great fighter and a national hero” (424). They conclude with the idea that the very nature of MMA itself, with its visceral and bloody displays of skill, tenacity, and embodied power, creates uniquely compelling physical symbolism for all sorts of narratives (425).

Weaving similarly introduces this idea of physical symbolism creating “physical feminism”. While women are typically socialized to use their bodies in ways to take up less space and be apologetic about their physical presence, MMA directly offers women liberation by encouraging them to physically impose themselves and shift gendered relationships of power (Weaving 130). Maya Maor discusses this idea of physical feminism at length in “Fighting Gender Stereotypes: Women’s Participation in the Martial Arts, Physical Feminism and Social Change” where she defines physical feminism broadly as “empowerment through physical activities,” attributing its rise to the feminist self-defense movement as “a way for women to physically express their independence, and as part of a larger feminist movement to combat violence and achieve self-determination for women” (38).

For example, Catherine Phipps and Alex Channon in “Pink Gloves Still Give Black Eyes” interviewed 27 female martial artists and found through qualitative analysis that these athletes worked to fulfill the narrative that normal, everyday women can be also tough and powerful fighters. Through these interviews, they were able to articulate the specific ways in which these martial artists’ ideas of femininity could be happily accommodated with the demands of martial arts and combat sports participation (Phipps and Channon 32). Maor herself ultimately concludes, through her own and other women’s lived experiences training mixed martial arts, that the subversive effects of women’s participation in martial arts does not only lie in diminishing the perceived performance of femininity, but also in offering women an arena distinct from that of sexuality, incorporating newer performances of masculinity in participating mixed martial artists’ identities, creating non-binary queer performances and identities that are not based in sexuality (45). As stated within the article by a female professional judoka: “they treat you like a different

kind of species. You are neither a man, nor a woman. You are something strange for the rest of the people” (Maor 45).

## Conclusion

On March 17th, 2023, Jeff Molina came out as bisexual, and posted a statement on social media after an intimate video of him and another man was posted online without his consent. In an interview with popular MMA pundit Ariel Helwani, Molina spoke on the incident, stating that “it was heartwarming to get messages from fellow athletes that are closeted, fellow UFC fighters that are closeted, people with notoriety that were just like, ‘Hey man, it’s an inspiration, and it sucks on the terms that it happened, but you’re an inspiration. It’s inspiring for you to come out and be the first male UFC fighter to be out’” (Al-Shatti).

While this narrative of acceptance might seem initially shocking considering the greater MMA culture we’ve examined, it is not without precedent: as Alex Channon and Christopher Matthews explain in the *Journal of Homosexuality*, in February 2012, UFC fighter Dakota Cochrane was outed as having previously performed several roles in gay pornography. These authors examined MMA media narratives through the lens of “inclusive masculinity theory” that both aimed to ‘save’ Cochrane's masculinity under the idea of him being “gay-for-play” while also celebrating the acceptance of homosexual men inside the sport that reactions by the greater MMA community to Cochrane's case represented (936-37).

However, far more research is needed to understand how the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement has interacted with popular MMA culture, in regards to both the hypermasculine norms that it proliferates, as well as its subversion of gender and identity through other notable role models in the sport. Moving forward with my work, I will explore these intersections in order to assemble a fuller understanding of how the existing culture of the UFC can be co-opted and transformed to further queer liberation efforts.

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