

## **Might for Right: Martial Arts for Youth Development and Women's Empowerment**

Riya Mehta Saran, Stanford University '25

**Abstract:** Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) is a growing tool, implemented in part to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), two of which include youth development and women's empowerment. Martial arts programs present a unique opportunity to further these development goals as they have been proven to increase physical and mental strength, teach life skills, provide mentorship opportunities, and allow women and girls to challenge restrictive gender norms. However, despite the proven benefits of martial arts programs, a framework for successfully establishing martial arts SDP programs is lacking. The following research examines demographic data and interviews with students, parents, and instructors from two Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do schools in Virginia to determine aspects of this program that have contributed to its successes. Based on this data, I present the Snakes and Ladders framework for martial arts programs to effectively achieve SDGs.

**Author's Note:** The author holds a third-degree black belt, earned through the Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do system and is a former part-time instructor at Jhoon Rhee Falls Church.

Youth development and women's empowerment are critical issues in the face of developmental stagnation worldwide. Developmental stagnation refers to delays in childhood development with respect to motor skills, speech, language, comprehension, or emotional development and has been exacerbated worldwide as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, "Today's children and youth represent the single largest cohort of young people in history," creating an unprecedented opportunity to address these global issues at a large scale (Right to Play, 2008). Investment in youth provides long-term benefits as these children age and contribute to society. Similarly, promoting empowerment of young women enables them to combat gender inequity from a young age, building their confidence to overcome inequities as adults and mitigating developmental stagnation that disproportionately impacts girls. Sport for Development and Peace (SDP), the intentional use of sports to advance development, provides a unique opportunity to jointly address these issues. SDP is a growing tool in which sports are used to address the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) (Right to Play, 2008). Youth development and women's empowerment align with several SDGs and can be achieved through a multitude of sports programs. The following research focuses on two sectors of SDP: Sport Based Youth Development (SBYD) and Sport and Gender Development (SGD). SBYD encompasses leveraging sport to advance life skills among youth, while SGD focuses on using sport as a tool to advance women's empowerment and gender equity.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1978) declared sport and physical education a fundamental right for all, and SBYD centers on "ensuring optimal conditions for a child's early years" (Right to Play, 2008). SBYD can support that right by implementing SDP programs to reduce child mortality and disease while promoting universal education, environmental sustainability, and global partnerships. SBYD often addresses youth who have started their lives at a disadvantage and works to intervene during critical childhood development windows to support children in their personal growth and interpersonal interactions. These programs provide children with the opportunity to become stronger physically and mentally, gain greater access to education, interact with peers and supporting role models, develop life skills, and be given a second chance to overcome their hardships. However, for these programs to be successful, significantly more emphasis must be placed on development at the center of the experience rather than competition, and the coaches and staff must be well trained and equipped to provide the necessary support (Webb & Richelieu, 2015).

Similarly, SDP can be used to promote women's empowerment by targeting girls at a young age and supporting them in understanding the values of teamwork, self-reliance, and resilience while having "a multiplier effect on their health, education and leadership development" (Hayhurst et al., 2021). SGD is used not only to empower young girls individually, but also to address gender stereotypes and gender equity. SGD addresses gender stereotypes by placing women in roles outside the home and providing them an opportunity to excel among their male counterparts at elite levels. Additionally, "female coaches, peer

educators, and sport program staff offer girls and women visible proof that women can excel and lead in society" (Right to Play, 2008).

Prior research highlights how several sports initiatives have been implemented to address the development goals in both the SBYD and SGD sectors. While these programs have had varying success rates across a variety of sports, the following study explores martial arts as a unique opportunity to target both sectors together to support outcomes for youth and women in both developing and developed countries.

The benefits of martial arts interventions are not limited to wealthy nations and have the potential to uplift individuals coming from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Common misconceptions may portray martial arts as a sport that facilitates increased aggression or an inclination to fight. However, current programs demonstrate that this notion may not be true. But which aspects of these current martial arts programs allow them to effectively support youth development and women's empowerment? And how can these programs serve as a framework for implementing future SDP programs? The following research explores enrollment demographics by age, rank, and gender from two Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do schools, one of the most established programs in the US, and nine interviewee perspectives including students, parents, and instructors, to identify how martial arts programs can and should be implemented more broadly to support youth development and women's empowerment moving forward.

## **Background on Sport for Development and Peace**

Current SDP literature includes reports from the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (IWG) and scholars who have conducted analysis on the progression of SDP as a development tool (Right to Play, 2008). IWG published Harnessing the Power of Sport, a framework that highlights the importance of addressing the SDGs and the consequences of failing to address the goals across several key SDP sectors, including SBYD and SGD. The United Nations (UN) (2016) also published its Action Plan on SDP which identifies sport as an important enabler of sustainable development and provides actionable steps on how to implement the policy recommendations. These documents all highlight that best practices include placing gender and youth development at the forefront of SDP initiatives and making those issues integral parts of development plans.

While SBYD has been a UN priority for about 40 years, SGD has become a more recent focus area in the last two decades. Scholars such as Hayhurst (2021) investigate the history and progression of SGD, emphasizing how the distinction between equity and equality or limiting the focus to "girls" rather than "adolescent girls and young women" can detract from the efficacy of SDP programs. Referring to participants as "girls" can reinforce the idea of patriarchy, while "adolescent girls and young women" refers to a stage of life, leading to programs that support female empowerment as equals to their male counterparts. Additionally, the equity distinction is important because equality of opportunity generally neglects pre-existing disadvantages that some groups may face. SGD initiatives place a premium on women achieving equity in the face

of gender disadvantages because these initiatives aim to uplift women without detracting from the successes of their male counterparts.

Along with research surrounding the history and efficacy of SDP broadly, the following researchers examine the specific benefits of martial arts for SGD. Wall (2019) examines the benefits of judo and uses testimonials from women of all ages to demonstrate how Judo can positively empower women through the development of physical and emotional strength, social well-being, character building, and life skills to be employed outside of the sport. Hamilton (2022) focuses on mixed martial arts (MMA), concluding that for martial arts to successfully achieve women's empowerment, "it will require their implementation of feminist principles and pedagogies rather than simply providing a space for women to learn how to punch and kick" (p. 781).

In addition to women's empowerment, UNESCO's report on Youth Development Through Martial Arts also reviews the importance of gender equity in youth development, concluding that martial arts programs are successful in building youth resilience, respect for oneself and others, and inter-cultural dialogue (2019). With respect to at-risk youth, several researchers have explored the impacts of implementing martial arts programs in elementary and middle schools respectively, such as Twemlow et al. (2008), who found a reduction in aggressive behaviors in elementary schoolers and Zivin et al. (2001), who found a reduction in violence and expulsions in school for middle schoolers. Likewise, Lorenz (2018) concluded that the hierarchical program structure enables mentorship and healthy adult-child relationships for at-risk youth, as long as coaches are well trained to work with at-risk youth in community intervention programs. Similarly, well-trained coaching staff can also enable martial arts to be used as a treatment mechanism for learning disorders, given that tae kwon do training can have a greater positive impact on attention than other physical activities (Kadri et al., 2019).

However, the Martial Arts Studies Research Network identified multiple problems with engaging women and girls in martial arts and combat sports in a 2016 seminar: these sports have traditionally been associated with masculinity, women generally have had greater barriers to entry because of childcare obligations, female martial artists have tended to be hypersexualized in media, and male overrepresentation tends to deter female participation. These issues align with the equity concerns previously noted in Hayhurst's (2021) distinction between equality and equity. The Network proposed solutions that align with SGD best practices to promote equity. However, the authors also expressed the importance of "attending to gender issues whilst not assuming they are the only things that matter in women's and girls' lives" (Channon et al., 2016, p. 4). Hayhurst (2013) expands the potential for uplifting women through martial arts by highlighting female-focused programs that encourage Ugandan girls to become "entrepreneurs of themselves" and to take part in martial arts to "[build] an economically vigorous body that was employable and/or fundable" (p. 304). This rise in opportunity extends beyond efforts to engage women in girls in martial arts and combat sports, by defying cultural norms and breaking the cycle of poverty and domestic violence (Channon, 2016).

While current research identifies the benefits of SDP and martial arts as a strong example of supporting youth development and women's empowerment, this project examines the Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do program as an example of one of the longest standing martial arts programs in the US to identify how current martial arts programs can provide a framework for implementing future SDP programs. Tae kwon do is a Korean martial art, known for its use of kicks, as well as blocks and punches. Grandmaster Jhoon Rhee is known as the Father of Tae Kwon Do in America and Russia. He is credited with graduating over 100,000 black belts from his schools, including to several members of the US Congress, and over a 60-year period he was responsible for developing a structured program that focused on youth and gender inclusion. Grandmaster Jhoon Rhee stated that "most sports only emphasize winning, but I want to transform the training in the gym to human qualities. From endurance to perseverance, timing to punctuality, power to knowledge" (Smith, 2018).

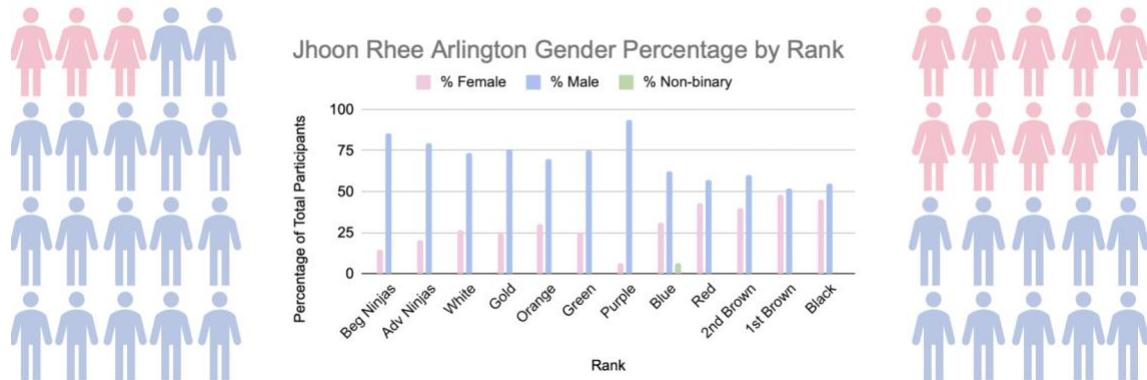
## Methods

This study examines demographic data, including the gender breakdown of student enrollment at Jhoon Rhee Arlington, a Jhoon Rhee school in Virginia, from 2013 through 2022. I analyze the current gender breakdown for Jhoon Rhee Arlington to understand the trends in gender as students progress in rank and age. I subsequently examine the gender breakdown of all full-time and part-time instructors who have worked at Jhoon Rhee Arlington since 2005 to determine if there is any correlation between the gender breakdown of instructors and students. I also collected the current student gender breakdown for Jhoon Rhee Falls Church, another Virginia program, but their dataset had more gaps in demographic information, so the following discussion will focus on Jhoon Rhee Arlington to allow for comparison with past student data and instructor demographics. While the demographic data provides quantitative metrics, the trends are coupled with qualitative evidence from nine interviews, as well as my own experience as a third-degree black belt and former instructor. The group of nine interviewees include male and female, former and current, students, parents, full- and part-time instructors, and program directors. The students include two male and two female students, all of whom have assisted in teaching younger students; the parents include a father of two students and a mother of one student; and the instructors include one female instructor who went through the system as a student, one transgender male instructor who went through the system as a female student, and one male instructor who went through the system as a student and now owns the Falls Church school. In addition to these interviews, I also draw on my own perspective as a student at Jhoon Rhee Falls Church for 14 years, achieving the rank of third-degree black belt and working as part time instructor for four years. These participants were selected to allow for a varied selection of participants who have different experiences as students and/or instructors in Jhoon Rhee programs. These participants were asked about their experiences in the program, what makes the Jhoon Rhee program different from other martial arts programs, and how gender influenced their experiences and perceptions of how martial arts should be taught (see Appendix A for interview questions).

## Results

### Figure 1

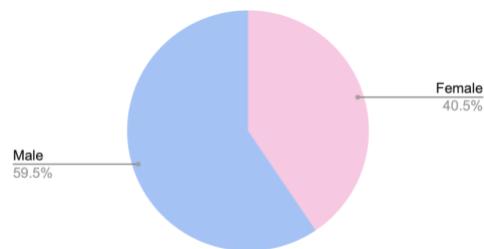
*Jhoon Rhee Arlington Gender Breakdown by Rank in February 2023*



*Note.* Figure 1 displays a snapshot of the percentage of students by gender at each rank (increasing from Beginning Ninjas to Black Belt) at Jhoon Rhee Arlington in February 2023. The male and female figures on the left represent the gender distribution of students at the lowest rank in the program (Beginning Ninjas), while the figures on the right represent students in the highest rank in the program (Black Belt).

### Figure 2

*Gender of Jhoon Rhee Arlington Instructors from 2005 to 2023*



*Note.* Figure 2 displays the percentage of instructors of each gender from 2005 through 2023 (includes full- and part-time instructors).

Despite beginner enrollment reflecting significantly higher male participation in 2023 (Figure 1) the percentage participation gap by gender decreases for students achieving higher ranks. The trend is also reflected in a significantly higher percentage of girls participating over age 13 than under age 13, which could be due to the age at which males and females start tae kwon do in these programs and earn their black belts, with males typically starting the programs at a younger age. Insights from instructors suggest that there is also a higher likelihood of girls pursuing tae kwon do as their main sport, while boys may transition to focusing on other sports in school. Overall, there has been a decline in the number of students enrolling each year from 2013 through 2022, but the decline for females is more significant going from 158 to 79 female

students enrolling from 2013 to 2022, compared to 288 to 215 male students enrolling (Appendix B). However, taking a closer look at 2020, when classes moved online, there was a significantly greater reduction in the number of male students than female students, which could be associated with a gender preference for teaching medium and commitment to training in a virtual environment (Appendix B). Enrollment across genders has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, but the increase is more significant for male than female students in the Arlington school (Appendix B).

Figure 2 highlights the distribution of male and female instructors, which represents a more similar distribution to the black belt student population than the initial population of enrolling students. The gender balance for Jhoon Rhee Arlington students at the rank of black belt in 2022 is 44.9% female and 55.1% male, while the gender balance for instructors from 2005 through 2023 is 40.5% female and 59.5% male (Appendix B). This trend likely occurs because all instructors earned their black belts through the Jhoon Rhee system, and given that earning a black belt can take five years on average, students at higher ranks have a greater level of commitment towards the sport and the school. Despite disparities in enrollment levels, Figures 1 and 2 suggest that the Jhoon Rhee system cultivates an environment that allows female students to succeed at the highest ranks as students and instructors equal to, if not more often, than their male counterparts. Interview responses support this claim as well. One student said, “By the time I left there were more girls that were of a higher rank than I was than boys” (Saran, J. 2023). From personal experience, many of the highest ranked students, including myself, were girls, and many of us went on to be instructors, despite there being more boys in our class when we started.

**Figure 3**  
*Snakes and Ladders Analysis*

<b>Snakes and Ladders for Martial Arts Programs</b>	
<p><b>Ladders</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Focus on martial arts for good</li> <li>● Focus on building character development and life skills</li> <li>● Mentorship from male and female instructors</li> <li>● Inclusivity</li> <li>● Youth centered</li> <li>● Maintaining strong academic standing to progress in rank</li> <li>● Emphasis on good attitude and behaviors outside the studio</li> <li>● Well-defined progression in rank</li> <li>● Balance between character development and martial arts skills</li> <li>● Evolving process, adapting to changing times while respecting tradition</li> <li>● Well-trained instructors</li> <li>● Support for female students to achieve higher ranks</li> <li>● Focus on sportsmanship and control</li> <li>● Provide opportunity for reflection</li> </ul>	<p><b>Snakes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Treating students as a number to meet a quota in a business</li> <li>● Expecting perfection that exceeds a student's potential</li> <li>● Lack of consistency in class offerings weekly and year-round</li> <li>● Lack of organization in rank progression</li> <li>● Large classes that lack individualized attention</li> <li>● Expensive programs that are inaccessible to certain groups</li> <li>● Too much focus on competition while limiting camaraderie</li> <li>● Focus on aggression</li> <li>● Having only male instructors, failing to provide female representation</li> <li>● Training always separated by gender, developing a lesser standard for female athletes</li> </ul>

*Note.* Figure 3 presents a Snakes and Ladders framework to evaluate martial arts programs.

Upon reviewing the interview responses, I analyzed common ideas and experiences under the Snakes and Ladders framework. The Snakes and Ladders framework identifies ladders as characteristics that contribute to the success of SDP programs and contribute to the SDGs while snakes are characteristics that are detrimental to the success of SDP programs and could detract from the SDGs (Webb & Richelieu, 2015). Ladders include having meaningful dialogue with the intended participants, setting attainable goals, having well-trained coaches and administrators, empowering athletes, receiving long-term funding, having easy access to equipment, and establishing clean, affordable, and enjoyable environments (Webb & Richelieu, 2015). Snakes include using sports to manipulate, politicizing sport, receiving short-term funding, and reinforcing imperialist relationships between the Global-North and Global-South (Webb & Richelieu, 2015). Together, the existing SDP Snakes and Ladders framework and this framework in Figure 3 which is specific to martial arts, can further the successful implementation of martial arts SDP programs.

The current Snakes and Ladders framework highlights the beneficial and detrimental aspects of SDP programs more broadly. However, Figure 3 distills these interview responses and analysis of the Jhoon Rhee system as a case study into a Snakes and Ladders framework, specific to martial arts programs. For example, female students and instructors stressed the importance of having female instructors as role models, while all interviewees, regardless of gender, agreed that coed training plays a critical role in development. A female student stated, “It’s definitely better to train coed [because] the relationships you build are so important to experience” (Tarutani, 2023). Similarly, a male student shared, “To have that experience of having girls and boys together you learn from them... I think it’s important even for kids, especially to know that anybody can do this” (Jain, 2023). These perspectives demonstrate the shared recognition across genders of the benefits of this program in advancing women’s empowerment through role models and youth development through coed training.

## Discussion

The Jhoon Rhee program has benefited students in areas ranging from influencing lifestyles to setting out career paths. Interviewees have identified discipline, perseverance, respect, focus, reflection, confidence, public speaking, writing, goal setting, memorization, leadership, responsibility, relationship building, individual success, physical strength, and a healthy lifestyle as traits or skills they have gained through Jhoon Rhee programs. While some of these traits are found in other programs, the emphasis on writing, goal setting, and public speaking are unique in that students are required to complete writing assignments as the test for each belt and deliver a speech for their black belt exams. As one instructor stated in an interview, the program provides a place to “work out negative emotions as a kid” and serves as “the great equalizer,” where students regardless of background or identity have the potential to excel. This potential for character development and athletic success provides students with “a safe place to learn and to fail and to get back up” (Rome, 2023). These ideals align with the SDP Snakes and Ladders in an effort to create a safe space, while indicating that successful martial arts programs require a focus on character development that often falls to the instructors’ responsibility.

As instructors have experienced this environment in their own training, they work to create that environment for their students. Given that all instructors are trained through the Jhoon Rhee system themselves, the program exercises control over ensuring that the instructors are well-trained to support students of all backgrounds. Unlike many team sports that may have a greater focus on success as a group, martial arts require a certain level of individual accountability, which necessitates an environment that empowers students to develop self-discipline. “You will only get as far as you’re willing to work, and you get rewarded for individual contributions” (Ohri, 2023). As students progress in rank and begin to understand the full realm of the martial arts arena, they also have the potential to share their knowledge through teaching others. Full- and part-time instructors view teaching as an opportunity to build patience and confidence and learn about themselves and others. One instructor reflected on her experience teaching, stating, “It’s helped me learn different personality types and how people learn

differently and just how to interact with everyone, whatever their race, background, culture any and everything" (Curiel, 2023). Another instructor stated:

"[Teaching] helps me remember that expectations for myself should also be realistic, while I'm trying to hold the students, not to my expectations of myself, but to ones that match their capabilities. We have all these ideas about what we're capable of and what we're not, and I like to show people things they never considered that I thought they could do" (Rome, 2023).

While it is important to hold students to high standards, teachers also acknowledged the importance of finding balance in striving for encouragement and perfection. Demanding perfection that exceeds a student's capabilities can be seen as a Snake in SDP programs because it can lead to disillusionment from students in their ability to advance and achieve success. Both reflections from instructors aligned with the idea that "we need to learn about each other to be the best teachers we can be" (Rome, 2023). For many instructors who began teaching at a young age, teaching also provided an opportunity to develop leadership skills that can carry into their academic and professional lives. One student who began assisting others starting at age seven stated, "It taught me how to lead others who are older than me, and how to carry more of an impact with my voice and my actions, even though I was much younger than the people around me" (Saran, J., 2023). Leadership from a young age is an increasingly important Ladder for the program as it promotes youth development from the start rather than attempting to teach necessary skills at a later age when individuals have more formed views and may already be at a disadvantage. That leadership then not only helps students progress in tae kwon do, but also in other sports that they may participate in as well as in their home, school, and professional lives.

Along with the mental aspects, martial arts is one of the few sports that requires full-body exercise and plays a significant role in increasing physical strength, endurance, balance, flexibility, and dexterity, which promotes student success as well-rounded athletes. With respect to competition, it is important for programs to foster a collaborative environment. An overemphasis on competition can lead to a lack of control and sportsmanship, which would decrease camaraderie and serve as a Snake for the program. However, competition also provides an opportunity for students to "put themselves out there in an uncomfortable position... opening their eyes, getting them to see something and realize that they're part of something bigger" (Curiel, 2023).

### ***Importance of Female Role Models***

Interviewees were also asked about their perceptions of gender roles in martial arts instructors, whether training should be coed or separated by gender and how they might respond to the common belief that martial arts is not for women and girls. With regard to female instructors, interviewees expressed a consensus that students are more likely to perceive female instructors as safe people and nurturing figures, while students may perceive male instructors as more intimidating. These perceptions may alter the tasks that instructors are asked to perform based on their gender and the reactions they may face from students and parents. Female instructors are more likely to work with the shyer students to help them acclimate to the studio

and class environment, while male instructors are more likely to work with boys who may come in with a bit of an attitude or are looking to pick a fight. Generally, female instructors are also more likely to be tasked with communicating with parents on the students' progress but will likely engage in less direct conversation or receive less respect from men who may be entering the studio for the first time. This phenomenon does not just occur in martial arts. Having personally coached in other sports as well, there is a common thread of female instructors being tasked with more emotionally laborious roles, often because female instructors are stereotypically perceived to be more attune to emotions. Female instructors are also less likely to hold decision making power across a teaching team, so when complex situations regarding human emotions arise, their higher ups are more likely to delegate those tasks to the female instructor, who the children may feel less intimidated by.

Given the differences in tasks that instructors of different genders may perform and their varying experiences to reach their positions as instructors, students and instructors both indicate that it is important to have both male and female instructors. Despite having positive experiences and mutually respectful relationships with male instructors, female instructors are critical for more balanced gender representation and to serve as role models for young female students, especially when male instructors are more prevalent across martial arts programs. Therefore, a lack of female instructors would be seen as a Snake for potential SDP programs because the lack of representation may lead to a decline in female student enrollment. As witnessed through personal experience in the Jhoon Rhee Falls Church school, there was a decline in female student enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic when the only lead instructors teaching via Zoom were male. However, the return to in person instruction and reintroducing female instructors, myself included, was correlated with an increase in the number of young girls joining the school.

For female students, seeing a female instructor for the first time is like a “light bulb moment,” showing them what options exist and subconsciously reducing doubt in themselves (Curiel & Rome, 2023). Female students are more likely to want to or feel the need to prove themselves, some even started martial arts to prove that they are “just as capable as guys are, if not better” (Tarutani, 2023). Young girls may come in with a feeling of needing to prove to themselves and their male counterparts that they are capable athletes. Female role models show young girls that they are just as capable of excelling and show male students that women are just as capable of holding higher ranks. These role models also increase advocacy to make clear that women and girls are capable of training hard but that certain tasks present a different challenge. Sharing these voices centers on the idea that, “I’m not saying I won’t. But I need you to know it’s a bigger ask than you think because everybody is different. Every body. Literally” (Rome, 2023). While female students are held to the same standard as their male counterparts throughout training, it is important for instructors to be able to recognize that the gender divide does make these tasks easier or more difficult to perform, to ensure that credit is given where credit is due, and students are not being pushed to a point of injury. Teaching teams are more likely to hold this understanding if the team is composed of both male and female instructors. These

perceptions of female instructors also contribute to interviewees' views on whether training should be co-ed or separated by gender.

### ***Importance of Co-Ed Training***

Overall, male participants were more likely to favor a co-ed training environment while female participants were more likely to lean towards a combination of both co-ed and separated by gender. Female participants expressed support for some sessions to be all female to bring together the minority group in a male-dominated environment, empower women and girls, and possibly focus on skills that may pertain more to women and girls from a self-defense standpoint. These sessions could target preparedness for unsafe situations that women are more likely to encounter. Separate training could also be more effective in societies that place a higher value on modesty, as girls and their parents would likely be more comfortable participating in the sport if they were not training with boys and if their instructors were female.

However, both male and female participants also expressed wanting to ensure that co-ed classes would promote female engagement in martial arts and ensure that female accomplishments were seen as no less than male accomplishments, given that separate training and standards may not be viewed as inherently equal. With co-ed training, students develop "camaraderie as a class and differentiation [comes] from your skill, not from your gender" (Saran, A., 2023). In contrast, training separated by gender would make "tae kwon do seem like a macho thing, like it's only for men, when it's very clearly for anybody" (Jain, 2023). Additionally, "for the purpose of self-defense you'll encounter people of both genders regardless of where you are, so it's important to be able to fight everybody, regardless of the gender" (Saran, J., 2023). However, given varying cultural backgrounds and experiences, there are still people who come into the studio questioning a woman's or girl's place in martial arts, and it is important to foster discussion and convey examples of how a person's place in martial arts is not dependent on gender. As one student describes, "a girl really can do martial arts, and I've come so far doing it" (Quraishi, 2023).

At the Jhoon Rhee Falls Church school, in 2020, there were a higher number of female instructors or students who held the rank of second-degree black belt or higher than their male counterparts. For the lone full-time female instructor, when asked how she would approach a conversation with someone who believes that martial arts is not for girls would have said, "Do you have a mother, a daughter, a sister, a niece, a really close friend that's female? And wouldn't you want them to be better protected, to be more confident, to be more disciplined? Why wouldn't you want that for anybody? Martial arts is for everybody, but I think it strongly benefits women and girls... whether it's using her words, using her brain, or if she has to, being able to physically defend herself" (Curiel, 2023). This approach allows instructors to frame a respectful conversation with the individual to help them understand the potential benefits of martial arts and what a person would be deprived of by being restricted from participating.

### ***Growth as an Individual, Not Just as an Athlete***

In conjunction with responses regarding the benefits of the Jhoon Rhee program and perceptions of martial arts with respect to gender, interviewees have pinpointed certain aspects of

the Jhoon Rhee program that set it apart from other programs in successfully promoting youth development and women's empowerment. Unlike many programs prior, the Jhoon Rhee program is modernized and youth centered (Rome, 2023). The program is also an evolving process that welcomes change while "still paying homage to the tradition" (Rome, 2023). One cornerstone of the program, which would be a prominent Ladder in future SDP initiatives, is promoting a balance of martial arts and life skills while working to expand those traits out of the studio and build character. Many programs have since started to implement character development into their curriculum, the Jhoon Rhee program was the first to "associate martial arts with more than just kicking and punching" (Rhee, 2023). The Jhoon Rhee program was also the first to incorporate musical forms, known as martial ballet, in which a series of movements was choreographed to music. Some programs place a greater emphasis on taking the offensive while fighting. However, the martial ballet aspect of the Jhoon Rhee program is more performance-oriented:

"It was about the discipline aspect, it was about learning the beauty of the art itself. While these skills in discipline, among others, do not necessarily have to come from a martial arts program, there's a lot that's embedded all in one place there. And then, because they're all tied together, there's a sense of self that develops out of that confidence" (Saran, A., 2023).

Interviewees also highlighted a high level of organization in the program. By requiring students to keep a binder to track their progress, their writing assignments for each belt test, their goals, and their overall journeys through tae kwon do, the SDP programs further exemplify the importance of reflection as a Ladder. The program also requires that students remain in strong academic standing by maintaining at least a B average in school and seeking responses from teachers and parents about the student's behaviors at school and at home, respectively. After passing the physical portion of each belt test, the students are also required to seek permission from their parents to receive their next belt, granted that they are behaving appropriately and to their family's standards at home.

### ***Unique Benefits of Tae Kwon Do***

The Jhoon Rhee system was also the first to patent safety equipment for sparring, which aligns with the SDP Ladders' need for a safe environment. The introduction of safety equipment fostered a more welcoming environment for women and children, sparking "a long history of including people that weren't included" (Rome, 2023). This inclusivity also includes establishing the Adaptive Program, a program started at Jhoon Rhee Arlington to serve students with special needs. Families of students in this program have likely been turned away from many opportunities under the pretense that programs do not have adequate resources to support their children or that their children will not be able to perform. In the Jhoon Rhee Arlington Adaptive Program, students have the opportunity "to work hard for something and feel the pride of actually achieving it and earning it at a pace in a style that works for them" (Rome, 2023). Additionally, peer helpers who assist in the program provide support with social skills. These peer helpers also see benefits of the program in themselves as they learn to be flexible and some go on to carry the skills they learn into college or careers such as social work or applied behavior

analysis. The Adaptive Program highlights how martial arts programs especially have the potential to support youth development for students with disabilities.

Analysis of several participants' experiences in the Jhoon Rhee program in comparison to perceptions of other programs has also shed light on potential pitfalls for martial arts implemented as SDP programs. Potential pitfalls include having large class sizes with many ranks grouped together and less individualized attention, or classes that are not offered consistently. To avoid this scenario, the Jhoon Rhee system works to ensure that "your kid will learn something versus being a number that meets a quota for the school to build their business" (Rhee, 2023). Martial arts programs could also suffer from a lack of organization, such as ill-defined ranks or trajectories for progression throughout the program. For a program to succeed, it must have well-defined ranks but also enough flexibility if necessary to change with respect to individual circumstances. For martial arts SDP programs to be successful, they must also overcome the barrier of financial accessibility. Under current programs, it is expensive to train and compete, which limits participation to a select demographic. These programs must also be accessible to a wide audience, and in particular, the youth, women, and girls who need them most.

## **Conclusion and Future Research**

Youth development and women's empowerment pose challenges with advancing life skills equitably across youth populations. Sport presents a unique opportunity to target both of these development challenges together. The literature identifies the benefits of martial programs in promoting these development goals as well as the characteristics necessary to foster a successful SDP program. My analysis of the Jhoon Rhee system investigates interviewee perspectives and enrollment data by rank, age, and gender. This investigation draws conclusions regarding the importance of a youth centered, well organized, inclusive, and evolving system in successfully supporting youth development, while highlighting female role models, coed training, and leadership development as being particularly successful in promoting women's empowerment.

While the diversity of interviewee backgrounds strengthens the credibility of the results, this study is limited in its analysis of one program with limited interviewees. However, this limitation could be addressed with further research through the lenses of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale and the Youth Development Tool Book. The Attitudes Toward Women Scale is a self-reported measure of individual attitudes towards gender ideologies, which can also be adapted into a shorter form and a version with simplified language for adolescents (Spence et al., 2013). The Youth Development Tool Book is a survey tool that surveys respondents over time to determine the efficacy of youth development programs by evaluating competence, confidence, connection, character, and compassion (United Way). Both tools can be applied to a larger number of respondents to obtain a more comprehensive overview of the development implications of the Jhoon Rhee program.

The UN places a high priority on achieving their 17 SDGs, particularly now as we have passed the halfway point to achieve those goals. This study demonstrates the potential for SDP programs centered in martial arts to advance Goal 5: Gender Equality as proven through the Jhoon Rhee program's ability to advance women's empowerment and gender equity. While the UN has not established an SDG specific to youth development, this study also highlights the role of martial arts programs in advancing Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being and Goal 4: Quality Education, which in turn allow for youth development to rectify developmental stagnation. The Snakes and Ladders Analysis establishes a framework for evaluating current programs and proposing new programs, highlighting youth centered focus, evolving processes, clear organization, inclusivity, and representation as critical criteria in support of advancing the SDGs. The synergies between the effects of the Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do programs and the UN SDGs highlight the potential for martial arts programs to succeed as future SDP programs, advancing youth development and women's empowerment worldwide.

## References

Channon, A., & Matthews, C. R. (2016). *Engaging women and girls in martial arts and combat sports: Theoretical issues and their implications for practice*.  
[https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/31754/1/9202\\_Matthews.pdf](https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/31754/1/9202_Matthews.pdf)

Curiel, J. (2023, February 13). *Interview about experiences with Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do*.  
Conducted by Riya Saran.

Hamilton, J. (2022, July 21). Breaking barriers? Examining neoliberal–postfeminist empowerment in women’s mixed martial arts. *Gender & Society*.  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08912432221111170>

Hayhurst, L. (2013, June 14). The 'girl effect' and martial arts: Social entrepreneurship and sport, gender and development in Uganda. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 20(3), 297–315.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0966369X.2013.802674>

Hayhurst, L., Thorpe, H., & Chawansky, M. (2021, December 10). Introducing sport, gender and development: A critical intersection. In *Introducing Sport, Gender and Development: A Critical Intersection*. Emerald Insight.  
<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-83867-863-020211001/full/html>

Jain, R. (2023, February 9). *Interview about experiences with Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do*.  
Conducted by Riya Saran.

Kadri, A., Slimani, M., Bragazzi, N. L., Tod, D., & Azaiez, F. (2019, January 12). Effect of Taekwondo practice on cognitive function in adolescents with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(7), 1261. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30642062/>

Lorenz, A. (2018, July 20). Hierarchy, community, and attachment: Integrating at-risk youth into martial arts and combat sports academies. *SearchWorks*.  
[https://searchworks.stanford.edu/articles/bth\\_133417036](https://searchworks.stanford.edu/articles/bth_133417036)

Ohri, S. (2023, February 13). *Interview about experiences with Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do*.  
Conducted by Riya Saran.

Quraishi, S. (2023, February 12). *Interview about experiences with Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do*.  
Conducted by Riya Saran.

Rhee, C. (2023, February 15). *Interview about experiences with Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do*.  
Conducted by Riya Saran.

Right to Play. (2008). *Harnessing the power of sport for development and peace: Recommendations to governments*. Sportanddev.org.  
<https://www.sportanddev.org/en/article/publication/harnessing-power-sport-development-and-peace-recommendations-governments>

Rome, A. (2023, February 13). *Interview about experiences with Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do*.  
Conducted by Riya Saran.

Saran, A. (2023, February 13). *Interview about experiences with Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do*.  
Conducted by Riya Saran.

Saran, J. (2023, February 8). *Interview about experiences with Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do*. Conducted by Riya Saran.

Smith, H. (2018, May 1). Jhoon Rhee, who helped popularize Taekwondo in the United States, dies at 86. *The Washington Post*.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/jhoon-rhee-who-helped-popularize-taekwondo-in-the-united-states-dies-at-86/2018/05/01/db60f3da-4d45-11e8-af46-b1d6dc0d9bfe\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/jhoon-rhee-who-helped-popularize-taekwondo-in-the-united-states-dies-at-86/2018/05/01/db60f3da-4d45-11e8-af46-b1d6dc0d9bfe_story.html)

Spence, J. T., Helmreich, R., & Stapp, J. (2013, October 24). A short version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS). *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 1(2), 219–220.  
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/BF03329252>

Tarutani, A. (2023, February 14). *Interview about experiences with Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do*. Conducted by Riya Saran.

Twemlow, S. W., Briggs, B. K., Nelson, T. D., Vernberg, E. M., Fonagy, P., & Twemlow, S. W. (2008). Effects of participation in a martial arts-based antibullying program in elementary schools. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(10), 947–959.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pits.20344>

UNESCO. (1978). *International Charter of Physical Education*.  
<https://www.unesco.org/en/sport-and-anti-doping/international-charter-sport>

United Nations. (2016, July). *United Nations action plan on sport for development and peace*.  
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2018/06/14.pdf>

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2019). *Youth development through martial arts*.

United Way. (n.d.). *Positive youth development (PYD) survey tool book*.  
[https://www.unitedwayglv.org/UnitedWay/media/PDFs/Positive-Youth-Development-Tool-Book-\(FINAL\).pdf](https://www.unitedwayglv.org/UnitedWay/media/PDFs/Positive-Youth-Development-Tool-Book-(FINAL).pdf)

Wall, S. (2019, May). Morals and martial arts: A woman's place of empowerment through judo. *DigitalCommons@URI*. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/850/>

Webb, A. J., & Richelieu, A. (2015, June 8). Sport for development and peace snakes and ladders. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 18(3), 336–355.  
<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/QMR-01-2014-0011/full/html>

Zivin, G., Hassan, N. R., DePaula, G. F., & Monti, D. A. (2001). An effective approach to violence prevention: Traditional martial arts in elementary schools. *Psychology: A Journal of Human Behavior*, 38(3–4), 40–47.  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/195940996?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>

## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

#### A. Saran

1. Why did you want your children to do tae kwon do?
2. Did you have any expectation for how long they would continue?
3. From a parent perspective, how do you think your children benefited from tae kwon do?
4. Given that two of your children did tae kwon do and the third did not, do you think there are differences in the way that the two who did would approach a situation versus the one who did not?
5. From what you know about other martial arts programs, what do you think makes the Jhoon Rhee program different?
6. Is there anything you would have changed about the Jhoon Rhee program?
7. Do you think it was better for your children to train coed or separated by gender, and why?
8. Do you think your son and daughter were ever treated any differently in their training because of their genders?

#### A. Tarutani

1. What has Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do done for you?
2. What has teaching done for you?
3. Do you think your experiences have had an effect on your life outside of tae kwon do?
4. From what you know about other martial arts programs, what do you think makes the Jhoon Rhee program different?
5. Is there anything you would have changed about the Jhoon Rhee program?
6. Did you notice differences in the program during virtual instruction?
7. When you're sparring would you think of a match or prepare for it any differently if you were sparring a boy or a girl?
8. Would you feel any different if you won or lost to a boy or a girl?
9. Did you have a preference for training with male or female instructors?
10. Do you think it is important to have instructors of both genders?
11. Do you think it is better to train coed or separated by gender?
12. What would you say to someone who thinks that martial arts is not for girls?

#### J. Saran

1. What has Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do done for you?
2. How old were you when you first started teaching, and were the kids that you were teaching the same age or older than you?
3. How do you think your teaching experience affected you as a leader?
4. What has teaching done for you?
5. How has tae kwon do affected you in school? Do you think it affected your grades?

6. Do you feel like doing taekwondo made you confident in your ability to defend yourself if you had to?
7. From what you know about other martial arts programs, what do you think makes the Jhoon Rhee program different?
8. Is there anything you would have changed about the Jhoon Rhee program?
9. When you're sparring would you think of a match or prepare for it any differently if you were sparring a boy or a girl?
10. Would you feel any different if you won or lost to a boy or a girl?
11. Did you have a preference for training with male or female instructors, and if so, why?
12. Do you think that training with girls affects how you interact with the opposite gender outside of tae kwon do?
13. Do you think it is better to train coed or separated by gender?
14. What would you say to someone who thinks that martial arts is not for girls?

J. Curiel

1. What has Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do done for you?
2. What has teaching done for you?
3. From what you know about other martial arts programs, what do you think makes the Jhoon Rhee program different?
4. Is there anything you would have changed about the Jhoon Rhee program?
5. Do you think it is important to have a focus on competition?
6. Did you feel like your training was any different because of your gender?
7. Do you think it makes more sense to train in groups by age or rank, or both?
8. Do you think it is better to train coed or separated by gender?
9. Did you have both male and female instructors growing up?
10. Do you think it's important to have female instructors, and if so, why?
11. Do you think you have been treated any differently by students, parents, or other instructors, as an instructor based on gender?
12. Do you think the tasks you were given as an instructor were different because of your gender?
13. What would you say to someone who thinks that martial arts is not for girls?

C. Rhee

1. What has Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do done for you?
2. Did all your siblings have the same level of involvement in tae kwon do?
3. What made you come back to tae kwon do after leaving it?
4. What has teaching done for you?
5. From what you know about other martial arts programs, what do you think makes the Jhoon Rhee program different?
6. Roughly how long does it take somebody to earn their black belt in the program?

7. Is it common for kids to start and go all the way through or take a break in the middle?
8. Other interviewees have cited the Jhoon Rhee philosophy as what makes the program different, so what would you consider to be the Jhoon Rhee philosophy?
9. Knowing that the program has evolved over the years, is there anything about it now that you would still look to change?
10. Why did you start the binder system?
11. Do you think it is better to train coed or separated by gender, and does that apply to sparring?
12. Did you have male and female instructors growing up?
13. Do you think it's important to have both male and female instructors, and if so, why?
14. Do you think there has been a difference in the last few years without a full-time female instructor?
15. Do you notice a difference in the ways that students will work with a male or female instructor, or the way instructors treat students and vice versa?
16. What would you say to a new parent or student coming to ask you about the program?

A. Rome

1. What has Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do done for you?
2. Do you think it is better to train coed or separated by gender?
3. What do you think teaching has done for you?
4. What changed for you that made you want to teach?
5. From what you know about other martial arts programs, what do you think makes the Jhoon Rhee program different?
6. If there was one thing you could go back and change through your experience, what would it be?
7. What made you start the Adaptive Program at Arlington?
8. What are some of the biggest benefits of the Adaptive Program for students?
9. Are the instructors for the Adaptive Program mainly assistants or full-time instructors?
10. How do the student assistants react to the program, and what do they learn from it?
11. Do you ever hear of students in the Adaptive Program or the students teaching the program developing skills that transfer to their lives outside of tae kwon do?
12. Do you think these developments are specific to martial arts or sports in general?
13. When it comes to sparring, do you think age or rank makes more of a difference?
14. How common are Adaptive Programs around the country, and do you think it would require a significant amount of training for current instructors to implement a program like this one in addition to their current teaching experience?
15. Did you notice any difference in the way you were treated by students, parents, or other instructors before and after you transitioned?

16. For the generation that doesn't know you transitioned, do you feel like there is a difference presenting as a man or as a woman instructor, and do you think it has had an effect on your teaching?

R. Jain

1. What has Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do done for you?
2. Did any of your experience transfer to your life at home or school?
3. How did working with younger students affect you?
4. From what you know about other martial arts programs, what do you think makes the Jhoon Rhee program different?
5. Is there anything you would change about the Jhoon Rhee program?
6. When you're sparring would you think of a match or prepare for it any differently if you were sparring a boy or a girl?
7. Do you think it is better to train coed or separated by gender?
8. Would you feel any different if you won or lost to a boy or a girl?
9. Did you have a preference for training with male or female instructors?
10. If anyone came to you interested in starting tae kwon do, what would you say to them?

S. Quraishi

1. Has your goal been to become a black belt all along?
2. What have you learned from Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do?
3. Do you think your experience has affected you outside of tae kwon do?
4. If you went back to the start of your training, is there anything you wish you or the program had done differently?
5. When you're sparring would you think of a match or prepare for it any differently if you were sparring a boy or a girl?
6. Would you feel any different if you won or lost to a boy or a girl?
7. Do you have male and female instructors?
8. Do you think it helps to have role models achieving the ranks you are working towards?
9. If anyone came to you interested in starting tae kwon do, what would you say to them?
10. What would you say to someone who thinks that martial arts is not for girls?

S. Ohri

1. What made you put your son in tae kwon do?
2. Do you think your son has benefited from tae kwon do?
3. From what you know about other martial arts programs, what do you think makes the Jhoon Rhee program different?
4. Do you think your son doing tae kwon do has had an impact on his life outside of tae kwon do?
5. Do you think training should be coed or separated by gender?

6. Given that your son is the youngest of your three children, and you have two older daughters, is there any reason why they did not also do tae kwon do?

## Appendix B

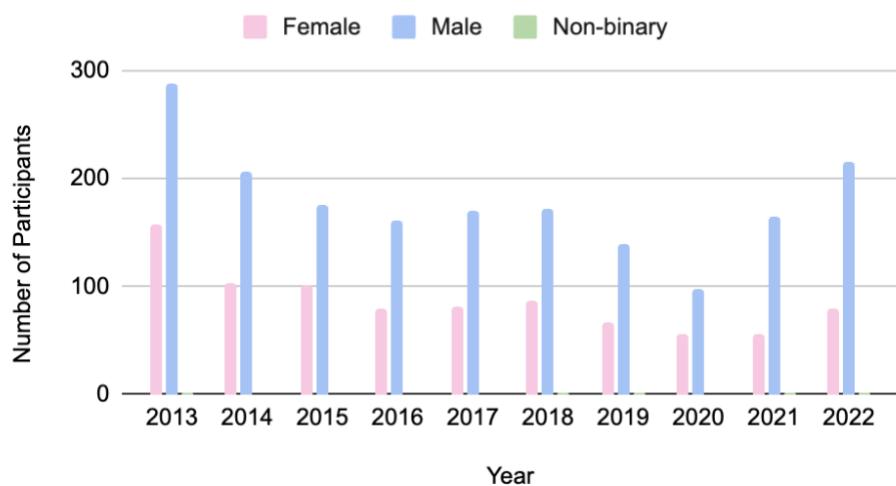
### Summary Statistics

**Figure B1**

*Jhoon Rhee Arlington Gender by Year*

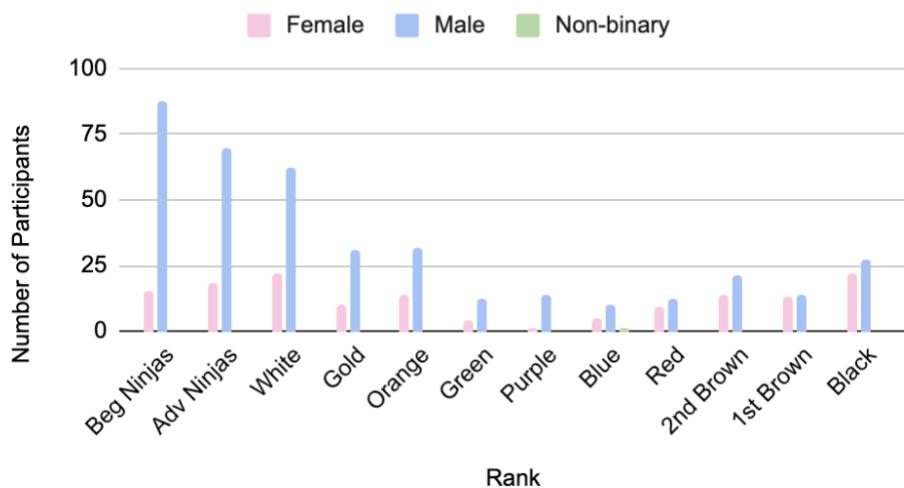
Year	Female	Male	Non-binary	Total	% Female	% Male	% Non-binary
2013	158	288	1	447	35.3	64.4	0.2
2014	103	206	0	309	33.3	66.7	0
2015	102	175	0	277	36.8	63.2	0
2016	80	161	0	241	33.2	66.8	0
2017	82	170	0	252	32.5	67.5	0
2018	86	172	1	259	33.2	66.4	0.4
2019	67	140	1	208	32.2	67.3	0.5
2020	56	97	0	153	36.6	63.4	0
2021	56	164	1	221	25.3	74.2	0.5
2022	79	215	1	296	26.7	72.6	0.3

*Jhoon Rhee Arlington Gender of by Year*

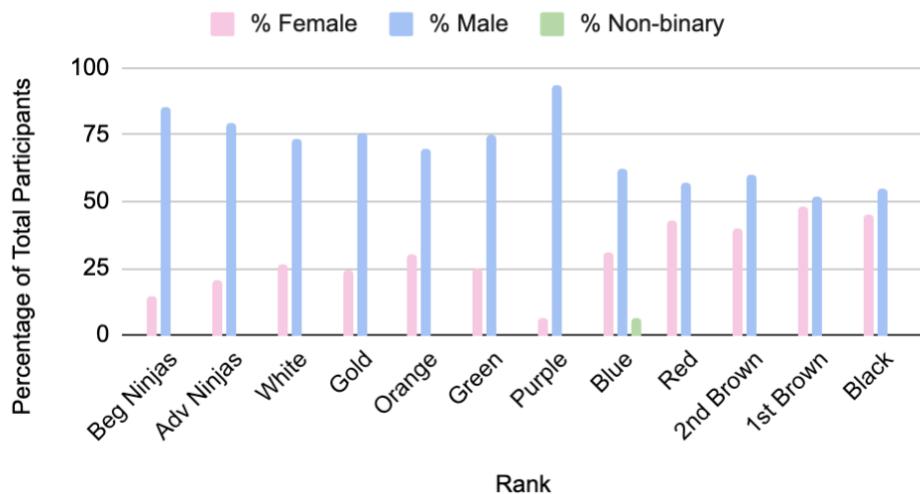


**Figure B2***Jhoon Rhee Arlington Gender by Rank*

Rank	% Female	% Male	% Non-binary
<b>Beg Ninjas</b>	14.6	85.4	0
<b>Adv Ninjas</b>	20.5	79.5	0
<b>White</b>	26.2	73.8	0
<b>Gold</b>	24.4	75.6	0
<b>Orange</b>	30.4	69.6	0
<b>Green</b>	25	75	0
<b>Purple</b>	6.7	93.3	0
<b>Blue</b>	31.3	62.5	6.3
<b>Red</b>	42.9	57.1	0
<b>2nd Brown</b>	40	60	0
<b>1st Brown</b>	48.1	51.9	0
<b>Black</b>	44.9	55.1	0

**Jhoon Rhee Arlington Gender by Rank**

## Jhoon Rhee Arlington Gender Percentage by Rank



**Figure B3**

*Jhoon Rhee Arlington Gender of Instructors*

Gender of Instructors Since 2005	
Female	30
Male	44
Non-binary	0
Total	74

\*one transition from female to male, counted as male

**Figure B4***Jhoon Rhee Arlington Additional Gender Data*

<b>Gender</b>	
Female	168
Male	433
Non-binary	1
Total	602

<b>Gender Under Age 13</b>	
Female	87
Male	325
Non-binary	0
Total	412

<b>Gender Above Age 13</b>	
Female	79
Male	103
Non-binary	1
Total	183

<b>Gender in Cardio Kickboxing</b>	
Female	16
Male	1
Non-binary	0
Total	17

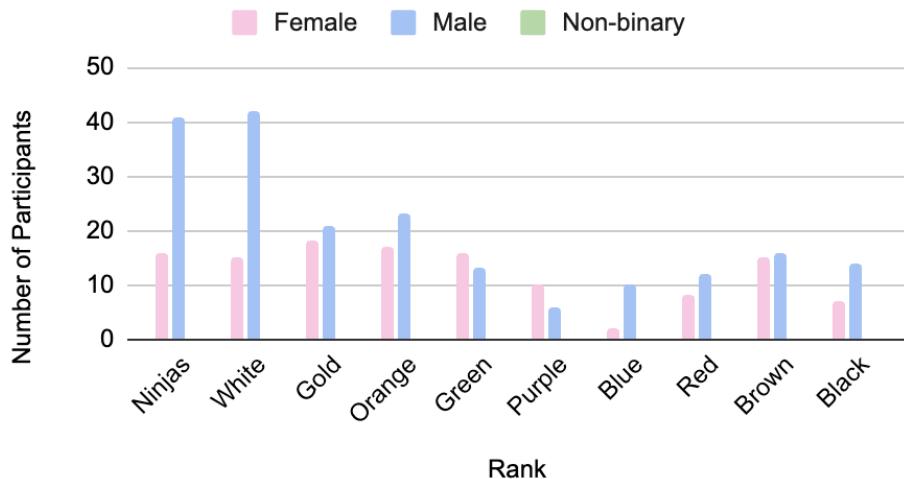
<b>Gender in Adaptive Program</b>	
Female	4
Male	38
Non-binary	0
Total	42

**Figure B5**

*Jhoon Rhee Falls Church Gender by Rank*

<b>Rank</b>	<b>% Female</b>	<b>% Male</b>	<b>% Non-binary</b>
<b>Ninjas</b>	28.1	71.9	0
<b>White</b>	26.3	73.7	0
<b>Gold</b>	46.2	53.8	0
<b>Orange</b>	42.5	57.5	0
<b>Green</b>	55.2	44.8	0
<b>Purple</b>	62.5	37.5	0
<b>Blue</b>	16.7	83.3	0
<b>Red</b>	40	60	0
<b>Brown</b>	48.4	51.6	0
<b>Black</b>	33.3	66.7	0

## Jhoon Rhee Falls Church Gender by Rank



## Jhoon Rhee Falls Church Gender Percentage by Rank

