



Breaking concrete is an expression of not just strength, but also focus, Chi, and technique. Setting it on fire has no practical benefit - but it does make it look cool!

Don't try this without proper training 😊

[Photos by Neal Hardy, 2011]

Women's and girl's participation in Kung Fu

*By Ingrid Bean, 3rd higher-level black belt in Pai Lum Kung Fu
30.5.2026*

About me

I am a woman who has trained in martial arts for more than half my life. Growing up, I never had much interest in sports, particularly ones that involved playing in teams, or that included throwing, hitting, or kicking balls. While I was fairly active as a child, I didn't think of myself as sporty, or as particularly physically capable.

All that changed when I started martial arts. I began with Tae Kwon Do when I was 15, then 3 years later switched to Pai Lum Kung Fu. I found, in Kung Fu, a place where I could learn at my own pace, supported by my instructor and fellow students, without the pressure of having to compete with anyone but myself.

"Women belong in martial arts at every stage of life."

The knowledge of how I can use my body and mind to be fit, capable, confident and safe is something that I have carried with me for nearly three decades. I trained through puberty, various injuries, depression, a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis, and my first pregnancy. I took a break for several years while my children were small, always knowing that I would return, and am now training through peri-menopause.

I am an accredited instructor through the Australian Coaching Council and often support the learning of other students in our club. I train with men, women, and children of all shapes, sizes, ages, and abilities. I practice techniques both unarmed and with weapons. I also break concrete.

Author's note:

This article is about women's participation in martial arts. The use of the terms "women" and "girls" refers to people with female bodies, body parts or organs, and includes people who identify as female or who have lived experience as a woman or girl.

The author recognises and acknowledges that transwomen may have breasts that need adequate support and protection. Transmen may have a uterus and experience menstruation. Intersex and non-binary people may have breasts and/or a uterus.

Why should you try Kung Fu?

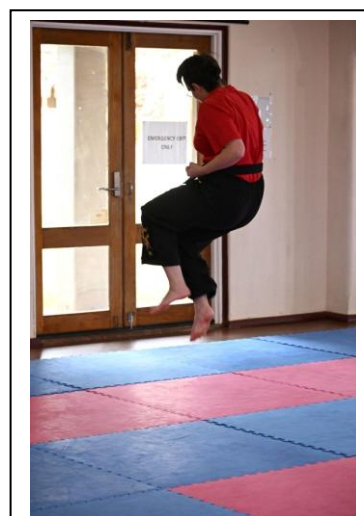
Kung Fu is a Chinese martial art that traces its roots back more than a thousand years. There are many different styles of Kung Fu, each with their various strengths, philosophies and flavours. I believe that while there is no single perfect style of Kung Fu, with all the styles on offer you will find one that is perfect for you. For me, that style was Pai Lum Kung Fu. I love the feeling of family among the members of our club, and the fact that the curriculum is delivered in a personalised way that works to develop your skills and abilities.

“The aim of training is not perfection: rather it is to continue to build upon your skills and confidence”

Kung Fu trains your body and mind to work together to achieve things beyond your expectations. Whatever your starting point, you will improve your strength, flexibility, and overall fitness. You will learn how to use your breath to focus your energy, enabling you to apply more power and precision in your techniques.

Kung Fu teaches that while you should avoid a fight where possible, you are entitled to use force against an attacker when necessary. As a woman, this is unfortunately all too likely to be relevant. Working with training partners who are often bigger and stronger than me means that I don't find men physically intimidating, as I am confident in my own capabilities.

Kung Fu has practical benefits for fitness and self-defence, and is a fun way to exercise. It's a way to meet people and develop new skills. Depending on your club, and your personal interest, there may be opportunities to participate in competitions and performances which let you showcase your skills. If you're looking for a different way to use your body, I encourage you to try Kung Fu.



Even after decades of practicing Kung Fu, I am still regularly surprised to realise how high I can jump.

[Photo by Shane Sparkes, 2024]

Things to be aware of when you start training in Kung Fu

If you decide to try Kung Fu, there are a few things worth considering. Like all sports, Kung Fu is a physical activity that therefore has some potential risks. Accredited instructors know how to support students to train safely in terms of individual strengths and capabilities. However, there are factors that impact women athletes that you should be aware of.

Breast support and protection

Breast injuries among women and girls who participate in contact sports are becoming better acknowledged and understood (see articles [here](#), and [here](#)). Damage to breast tissue from impact, or excessive movement during exercise, can have significant long term health issues and can affect people's capacity to train effectively. People with larger breasts are more likely to

get injured: large breasts move more during exercise, and are harder to avoid coming into contact with. That said, breast injury is possible, and potentially serious, whatever your size.

Breast injuries can be minimised by well-fitted bras and appropriate chest protection. There are many sports bras on the market: it's worth the effort to find one that fits properly, is comfortable, and reduces breast movement as much as possible. Wired sports bras cup each breast separately and generally provide good support, but the underwire may be uncomfortable depending on the type of movements you are doing while training. Wire-free sports bras tend to squash your breasts together giving a "mono-boob" look, but you won't get the discomfort of an underwire digging into your ribs. Breast size may change throughout your life, particularly as you go through puberty, pregnancy and menopause, or if you lose or gain weight, so it's important to get re-fitted for your bra every few years (or as needed).



The opening moves of one of my forms: Mighty Wings of the Eagle.

[Photo by Shane Sparkes, 2024]

“Appropriate breast support and protection is essential for comfort and safety.”

Martial arts inherently involve contact with your training partners, so it's also important to have appropriate breast protection, especially when you are sparring or engaging in other physical contact. This is no different to the way men would use a groin guard.

The level of contact expected will inform what type of chest protection is most appropriate for your art. Your instructor should be able to give you guidance on what type of chest protector is best for their style. Some martial arts use padded chest protectors that are worn over the top of clothing. There are also options for moulded plastic protectors that slide into a crop top and are worn inside/underneath clothing. Single piece protectors that cover the sternum as well as the breasts don't usually correspond to bra size. Personally, I can never find single piece ones that fit properly: if it's big enough to go around my breasts, it's too loose around the ribs so it doesn't sit securely. I find that separate pieces for each breast work best for me.

Menstruation

There is an increasing understanding of how the menstrual cycle impacts physical and psychological performance and wellbeing (see [here](#)). If your cycle is irregular, you might worry about your period starting unexpectedly during training. You might also worry about leakage from your period products, especially if you experience heavy bleeding. Leakage may be of particular concern if the training uniform includes white, or light-coloured pants (discussed [here](#), and [here](#)). One way to reduce the risk of leakage is to use period underwear. There are a range of period undies available both online and in the supermarket.

“Understanding your menstrual cycle can help support your training regime.”

Some women find that exercise can help with mild menstrual cramps, but if your cramps are severe, you almost certainly won't feel like training. Your menstrual cycle may also affect your mental and emotional state, which can impact your desire to train.

It is useful to understand your menstrual cycle, and the symptoms you experience, so you can train in a way that takes this into account. I also encourage you to talk to your instructor if your menstrual symptoms interfere with your training. This will enable them to better support you and help break down the stigma around menstruation.

Urinary incontinence

Many women experience urinary incontinence at some point in their life. This can be messy, uncomfortable and embarrassing to deal with when training. However, there are things you can do to minimise this discomfort. There are a variety of incontinence products available from the supermarket (or online) such as pads and underwear (disposable and/or reusable). You may consider seeing a women's health physiotherapist (or other professional), who can teach you ways to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles. If needed, these professionals can also fit and provide a pessary, which is inserted into your vagina prior to training, to support your pelvic floor.

“A leaky bladder doesn't have to get in the way of training.”

Sometimes, simply adjusting the way you exercise can help. Even before I went through two pregnancies, I had a tendency to leak urine when sneezing or jumping. When I mentioned this to my instructor, he swapped out star-jumps from our warm-up routine to a different exercise that was more friendly to my pelvic floor. This was an easy change to make, and one that potentially benefited many other students as well.

Perimenopause

If you are going through perimenopause, you may experience a number of symptoms that should be accounted for while training. These could include brain fog, temperature regulation, muscular/skeletal changes, heavy menstrual periods, and the aforementioned urinary incontinence.

If you are concerned about how perimenopause could impact your training, make sure you talk to your instructor so that they support you appropriately. You should also consider seeking medical advice if you are worried about your symptoms.



Wielding my Dao (Chinese broadsword) in a form called Plum Blossom.

[Photo by Shane Sparkes, 2024]

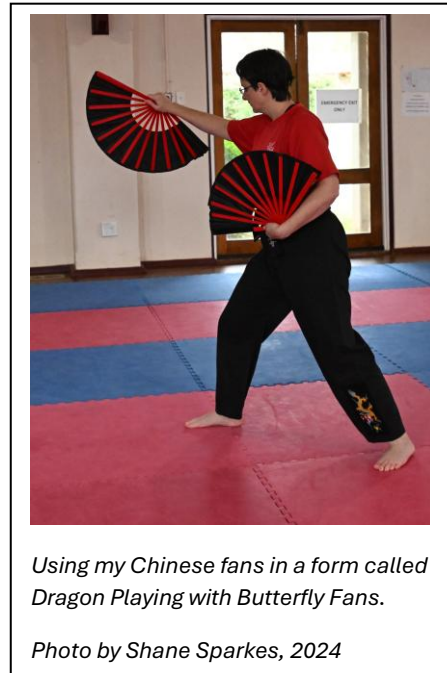
Wrapping up

I have never been shy of speaking up about my training needs, and our senior instructor (who is male) has always been happy to adjust techniques or exercises to support me.

While these conversations can be uncomfortable, you have the right to have your needs accounted for. I therefore encourage you to communicate openly with your instructor about any concerns you have (just like you would if you had an injury that needed to be managed). This will improve your training experience, and also make it better, and safer, for the women who come after you.

“Training changes more than just your fitness, it changes how you see yourself.”

Kung Fu is suitable for women and girls of all ages (though some clubs will have a minimum age limit). It is challenging, engaging and fun. If you’re looking to add something different to your exercise regime, to enhance the connections between your body and mind, or to improve your confidence and capabilities, you should try Kung Fu.



Using my Chinese fans in a form called Dragon Playing with Butterfly Fans.

Photo by Shane Sparkes, 2024

Tips for starting training

- Get yourself a good sports bra and some period undies (these can be good for urinary incontinence too)
- If you’re worried about urinary incontinence (bladder leakage), see a women’s health physio. There are also a variety of incontinence products that people may find helpful including pessaries (which need to be properly fitted by a women’s health professional), pads and underwear (disposable and/or reusable)
- Seek medical advice if you are concerned about menstrual pain, heavy bleeding, or perimenopause symptoms.
- Know that you have the right to train safely, in a way that works for your body - don’t be afraid to ask for modified exercises or instruction if that will help you to participate in martial arts
- If you’re not vibing with a particular club, don’t think that Kung Fu is not for you - use it as an opportunity to try out some other clubs until you find one that fits.
- Give it a go, and have fun

Useful links

These links are mostly about women in sports, rather than in martial arts, but the principles still apply.

Menstruation:

- [Breaking the Barriers: Periods and Girls' Sports](#)
- [Does a woman's menstrual cycle affect her athletic performance? Here's what the science says \(theconversation.com\)](#)
- [Opinion: Period shame stops countless girls from continuing sport. The Women's World Cup can help break this stigma \(2023\)](#)

Breasts:

- [The prevalence, severity, and mechanism of breast injuries within women's rugby league - Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport \(jsams.org\)](#)
- [The Occurrence, Causes and Perceived Performance Effects of Breast Injuries in Elite Female Athletes - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)
- [Medical research - Boob Armour](#)
- [Many Australian women are exercising in the wrong sports bra. Here's how to get the right fit - ABC News](#)

Urinary incontinence

- [Urinary Incontinence in Athletes - Physiopedia](#)
- [Urinary Incontinence Among Elite Female Gaelic Sports Athletes - Urologic Health](#)

Perimenopause:

- [Physical activity during perimenopause – Health and Wellbeing Queensland](#)