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Research article

Fighting in the shadows of masculinity: An ethnography of women's gender performativity in the practice of *pencak silat* in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article examines how women athletes of *pencak silat* in Indonesia negotiate gender expectations through their engagement with a traditional martial art. Rather than treating gender as a fixed role, the study focuses on how socially embedded norms—particularly those circulating within Indonesian religious and cultural contexts that associate femininity with modesty, restraint, and passivity—are enacted, negotiated, and reworked through bodily practice. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and Butler's framework of gender performativity, the article shows how women's bodies, including those wearing the hijab, do not simply conform to these normative expectations but participate in producing alternative ways of being women within the *silat* arena. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with female *pencak silat* athletes at an Islamic university in Jakarta, the analysis demonstrates how training sessions, competitions, and everyday interactions transform *silat* into a symbolic and social space in which strength, discipline, and moral legitimacy are continually redefined. In this sense, *silat* practice becomes not only a form of physical training but also a site of cultural negotiation, where dominant gender norms are neither wholly rejected nor passively accepted, but actively rearticulated through embodied practice. By approaching *pencak silat* as a field of inquiry into bodily politics and gender performativity, this study contributes to broader anthropological discussions on gender, religion, and power in contemporary Indonesian society.

Keywords: gender performativity, intersectionality, *pencak silat*, feminist ethnography, women's bodies

Introduction

One late afternoon at a university sports hall in Jakarta, we met Putri, a *pencak silat* athlete who has practiced martial arts since secondary school. Sitting cross-legged on the training mat, she wore a complete silat uniform with a neatly wrapped black headscarf framing her face. Behind her warm smile, Putri harbored a strength that was not only physical but also deeply symbolic. "At first, many people said, 'Why would a woman do martial arts, especially wearing a hijab?'", she said with a laugh. "But that's what challenged me. I wanted to show that women can be strong without losing their personhood as women, as Muslim women."

This is how Putri, a young female martial artist from a local *pencak silat* community, described her journey. She recalled how her body was once deemed too "delicate" for the ring, and how she had to prove that toughness is not a male monopoly. For her, every movement she performed in the arena was a form of asserting her right to exist and to be empowered in public.

Putri's narrative reveals layers of meaning in the practice of *pencak silat* as a site of gender negotiation and gender expression. Like other traditional Indonesian martial arts, *pencak silat* is not only a physical discipline but also a cultural field embedded with social constructions—particularly constructions of gender (Wilson, 2015). Historically, *pencak silat* or *silat* has been represented as a male domain, where strength, aggression, and leadership are aligned with masculinity (Young, 2009). This perspective is reinforced by social norms that dichotomize space between "men who protect" and "women who are protected," positioning men in the public sphere and women in the domestic one.

However, Putri's experience gradually unsettles these seemingly established boundaries. Her presence, alongside other women engaged in the world of *silat,* not only increases the number of female participants but also introduces new ways of interpreting the body, strength, and gender relations within it. Rather than merely entering a space already defined as masculine, they actively reshape the meaning of that space itself. In this sense, *pencak silat* becomes an arena where the categories of "men" and "women" no longer stand as fixed entities, but instead emerge as positions continuously negotiated through everyday practices. This phenomenon resonates with the critique of Moore (1988) on the assumption of a universal "woman," as Putri's experience demonstrates that gendered subjectivity is never singular, but always formed contextually through specific social relations imbued with agency.

Within training—through each punch, kick, and step—Putri's body does not simply move as a body that is "learning to fight," but also as a body that produces meaning. Her movements articulate alternative possibilities of what it means to be a woman in a space long associated with masculinity. In this regard, practice can be understood as a relational process through which gender is constituted, as emphasized by Strathern (1988) and Butler (1990), where gender does not reside as a fixed attribute of the individual, but emerges through ongoing networks of relations, exchanges, and symbolic processes. Thus, what appears as physical training is, in fact, also a social practice that reconfigures normative boundaries surrounding the body and gender.

Studies by Mennesson (2000) and Theberge (2003) suggest that women's participation in sports, particularly martial arts, is a space of social contestation and transformation. In the Indonesian context, Wicaksana (2016) notes that female athletes face layered challenges—from limited infrastructural support to social stigma—yet continually persist to assert their rightful claim to competitive and expressive spaces.

Channon (2014) highlights that women in martial arts, including mixed martial arts (MMA), often encounter objectification but simultaneously use such spaces to redefine strength and bodily autonomy. Similarly, in *pencak silat*, women are not merely "exceptions" in a male-dominated domain but agents who construct new meanings around strength, the body, and identity.

Hargreaves (1995) further argues that sport can serve as a tool for women's empowerment, even though it remains shadowed by masculine hegemony. In *pencak silat*, this is reflected in how women must prove themselves not only in the arena but also in the symbolic domain—through body language, personal narratives, and the complex management of identity.

From an anthropological perspective, however, martial arts cannot be reduced to arenas of competition alone; they must be understood as systems of embodied knowledge that are culturally and historically situated. Ethnographic work by Farrer (2009, 2015, 2019, 2020) is particularly instructive here. Based on long-term fieldwork in the Malay world, Farrer demonstrates that *silat* is deeply intertwined with ritual practice, Sufi-inspired cosmologies, and processes of self-cultivation, where the body becomes a medium through which moral, spiritual, and social knowledge is cultivated and transmitted. In later work, including Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge (2011), he further conceptualizes martial arts as transnational practices in which bodies carry, transform, and reinterpret knowledge across cultural contexts.

This perspective is reinforced by broader anthropological discussions on embodiment. As synthesized by Nešković (2021), the study of martial arts movement has been shaped by a "somatic turn" in the social sciences, drawing on foundational insights from Mauss (1973) on techniques of the body, and Bourdieu (1977) on habitus. Within this trajectory, bodily movement is not merely mechanical action but a site where dispositions, perceptions, and social structures are sedimented and reproduced, while also remaining open to transformation.

Placed within this anthropological framework, women's participation in *pencak silat* can be understood as a form of dynamic embodiment in which gender is not simply represented but enacted, negotiated, and reconfigured through disciplined practice. Each gesture, whether a strike, stance, or flow of movement, becomes part of a broader process through which practitioners internalize and simultaneously contest normative expectations about gendered bodies. In this sense, *pencak silat* is not only a gendered arena of struggle but also a field of embodied knowledge production, where subjectivities are continuously shaped through the interplay of discipline, cultural meaning, and lived experience.

Building on this perspective, women's engagement in *pencak silat* cannot be reduced to the acquisition of physical prowess alone. Rather, it unfolds as a form of bodily politics in which the female body becomes a site where dominant gender discourses are contested and reworked. Within this embodied practice, women do not simply occupy space in a traditionally masculine domain; they actively redefine the terms through which strength, discipline, and legitimacy are recognized. In this sense, Putri and other female *silat* practitioners emerge not merely as fighters, but as agents of cultural transformation who unsettle the enduring association between masculinity, courage, and power. Through their disciplined movements and embodied performances, they demonstrate that strength is neither singular nor inherently masculine, but can take multiple forms—including those expressed through bodies that are veiled, controlled, and precise in motion.

Putri's story opens space for us to understand that *pencak silat* is not only a cultural heritage but also an arena of evolving gender meaning. Women in *pencak silat* demonstrate that martial arts are not just about fighting opponents but about confronting the social boundaries that constrain personhood. In every strike and parry, they write new scripts that redefine what it means to be a woman—strong, resilient, and diverse in her expression.

While scholarship on women in sports has grown significantly, studies that specifically explore gender performativity in traditional martial arts such as *pencak silat* remain limited. Much of the existing literature focuses on women's participation in modern and professional sports, emphasizing media representation or structural barriers (Curry, 1995; Mennesson, 2000; Theberge, 2003). However, the context of *pencak silat,* with its deep cultural and spiritual values, offers a distinct arena where gender is not only performed but symbolically negotiated within complex power relations. This study seeks to fill that gap by positioning women's bodies as *silat* athletes and as cultural subjects within dynamic performative relations, while analyzing how *silat* practice becomes a space for rearticulating gender through embodied, everyday acts.

This study seeks to extend discussions of gender and sport by situating traditional martial arts—deeply embedded in local practices and religious values—as a site of analysis. Drawing on an ethnographic approach and Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, the study conceptualizes gender not as an identity essentially inscribed on the body, but as something continuously produced through repeated actions, gestures, bodily discipline, and social practices. In the context of *pencak silat*, the bodies of female practitioners reveal how gender norms are simultaneously enacted and negotiated through training routines, embodied techniques, modes of dress, and public appearance. Rather than functioning solely as objects of regulation—whether through religious norms, customary values, or the masculine traditions of *silat*—women's bodies emerge as active media for the production of meaning and resistance. The experiences of Putri and other female *silat* practitioners demonstrate that the wearing of the hijab, for instance, does not merely signify religious observance but also operates as a performative strategy through which women assert the legitimacy of strong, skilled, and capable female bodies within the *silat* arena. By reading *pencak silat* as a performative space in which gender is practiced, negotiated, and contested, this study contributes not only to feminist and sport studies but also highlights women's agency in redefining cultural boundaries within a martial arts domain historically dominated by men.

Visiting the site

In the late afternoon, as the call to prayer for *maghrib* approaches, the sports hall at University Nahdlatul Ulama of Indonesia (Unusia) in Jakarta gradually fills with students arriving in groups fter their classes end. From a distance, the sound of the *adhan* from the campus mosque often overlaps with the sharp whistle of the coach and the rhythmic thud of feet striking the floor. Nearly all the female students who enter this

space wear the hijab—a scene that reflects the character of the campus as an Islamic university where religious values are embedded not only in the curriculum but also in students' everyday lives. It is within this setting that the student *pencak silat* club conducts its regular training, occupying a position that is not always easy within the campus' moral, religious, and gendered landscape.

This ethnographic research has been conducted since early 2024 within the *pencak silat* student club, an organization that formally operates under the university's institutional structure. The club has a clearly defined hierarchy: a head coach, several assistant coaches—some of whom are alumni or senior students—and a student executive committee responsible for administration, training schedules, and participation in competitions. This structure reflects the university's effort to frame *silat* as an orderly and institutionally accountable activity, aligned with the values of discipline and Islamic morality upheld by the campus.

Women constitute the majority of the club's active members. According to Adi, the club's chair in 2024, approximately forty out of sixty active members are women. Most come from lower- to middle-class backgrounds and are enrolled in programs such as education, social sciences, and Islamic studies. Their reasons for joining vary. Some cite an interest in martial arts, others seek self-confidence or a sense of belonging within the campus community. Yet many also admit that they were initially hesitant.

This hesitation often emerges from their first encounters with the training space itself. Several female students described standing slightly apart in the corners of the hall during the early weeks, adjusting hijabs loosened by sweat while observing other bodies that appeared more assured in their movements. Putri, who joined the club in her first year of university, recalled the awkwardness she felt during her first collective warm-up —the movements of spreading her legs, bending her knees, and falling to the floor seemed to clash with bodily habits shaped by years of restraint and careful self-presentation in the public spaces of an Islamic campus. Such hesitation does not always disappear; for some women, it persists as a quiet inner voice accompanying each training session, especially when their bodies grow tired, bruised, or feel "too visible."

Over time, women's presence in the club comes to shape the rhythm and atmosphere of training itself. Soft laughter mixes with heavy breathing and the coach's instructions; during breaks, they help one another readjust hijabs, share safety pins, or sit cross-legged while talking about unfinished coursework. Yet this sense of togetherness does not erase differences in experience. Some women persist and develop, discovering

a growing confidence in their bodily capabilities, while others gradually reduce their attendance and eventually withdraw. With all its ambivalence and unevenness, women's participation transforms the *pencak silat* club from a space of physical training alone into a social arena where norms of piety, femininity, and bodily endurance are tested, negotiated, and—at times—abandoned.

Training sessions usually take place two to three times a week, in the late afternoon or evening, fitted between academic schedules and campus religious activities. Each session begins with warm-ups, followed by basic techniques, sparring, and a brief reflection led by the coach. For many female students, attending training involves complex negotiations: balancing coursework, other organizational commitments, religious gatherings, and expectations to assist with household responsibilities.

The sight of hijab-wearing female bodies moving swiftly—attacking, falling, and rising again—appears at once ordinary and unsettling on this campus. On the one hand, training is understood as part of cultivating self-discipline, a value strongly emphasized in religious teaching. On the other hand, aggressive movements and physical contact often generate moral tension.

Competitions, both internal and inter-university, make these dynamics more visible. When female athletes return with medals, institutional recognition follows—their names are announced at campus events, their photographs posted on official social media accounts. Yet behind these achievements lie stories of physical exhaustion, minor injuries concealed from parents, and inner conflicts between pride and guilt for being perceived as "too visible" or "too assertive." Not all women persist. Some choose to leave after one or two semesters, citing academic pressure, discomfort during training, or persistent family disapproval.

Fieldwork was conducted through participant observation and in-depth interviews between January 2024 and April 2025. We attended regular training sessions, competitions, and informal moments before and after practice. The main interlocutors—Putri, Zizah, Dewi, and Ani[1]—represent diverse experiences, ranging from those who found *silat* to be a source of self-confidence to those who remained in ongoing negotiation with parents and social norms. In Zizah's case, for instance, success in several competitions did soften her family's resistance, but it did not entirely dispel concerns about propriety and reputation.

1 All informant names in this ethnography use pseudonyms.

Accordingly, this study does not treat women's bodies in *silat* simply as symbols of linear empowerment. Rather, these bodies emerge as sites where meanings of gender, religiosity, and authority are continually negotiated. Drawing on Butler (1990), gender is understood not as a fixed identity but as something constituted through the repetition of bodily practices within specific social contexts. By situating *pencak silat* as a practice deeply embedded in the life of an Islamic campus, this study shows that empowerment, doubt, discipline, and compliance often coexist—and it is precisely within these tensions that the experiences of female *silat* practitioners acquire their significance.

Women's bodies in the arena: From object of representation to performativity

One late afternoon in the university sports hall, the floor was still slightly slick with sweat and dust from an earlier training session. Around twenty students stood in formation, most of them women dressed in black *silat* uniforms, their hijabs tightly secured around their heads. A short blast of the coach's whistle signaled the start of practice. The movements of the *jurus* were repeated again and again—stepping forward, settling into a low stance, blocking, counterattacking. Between instructions, the sound of heavy breathing mixed with the thud of feet striking the floor. When one of the female athletes fell during a sparring drill, she rose immediately without waiting for assistance, brushed the dust from her bruised knee, and returned to her position. There was no laughter or hesitation; instead, a brief nod from the coach marked acknowledgment. This small sequence—falling, rising, and resuming practice—recurred throughout the training sessions and revealed how women's bodies in the *silat* arena were treated as capable, resilient, and fully legitimate.

In a cultural landscape governed by a patriarchal knowledge system, women's bodies are often perceived passively—construed as visual and symbolic objects associated with beauty, gentleness, and fragility. As Mulvey (1975) argues, this construe is embedded in the male gaze that dominates both cultural and visual narratives. Within the practice of *pencak silat*, a traditional martial art saturated with masculinist values, women's bodies have similarly been confined to subordinated images: observed and assessed, but rarely recognized as agents.

This ethnography, however, reveals a significant shift. When women enter the *pencak silat* arena, they do not merely appear physically; they intervene in the meaning of the body itself. They transform the body from a passive object into an active subject that represents agency, awareness, and symbolic strength. In this context, *silat* is not only a

martial art but also a form of embodied knowledge—the body becomes a medium for articulating gender, resistance, and social meaning (Csordas, 2002). As Putri, a female *pesilat* (*silat* athlete), reflected on her experience:

> I used to think my body was something that needed to be protected—from violence, from people's gaze. But after joining *silat*, I began to understand that my body is not only to be protected, but also capable of protecting.

This statement illustrates how the arena becomes a space for women to reclaim authority over their own bodies. The body is no longer a site of surveillance or shame, but a medium of resistance—expressed not necessarily through verbal discourse, but through gesture, breath, and trained rhythm. In line with Foucault (1978), the body in *silat* becomes a battlefield of meaning—a site where power is both produced and contested.

The female body within *silat* practice becomes a moving narrative, not merely displayed but expressive: of gender, of wounds, of strength. This resignification shifts the body's position from a normative object to an interpretive and meaning-making subject (Nichter & Bordo, 1995). The woman's body in the arena thus produces counter-narratives to dominant gender constructions, contributing to an embodied counter-hegemonic discourse.

Zizah, a *silat* athlete, affirmed the complexity of her body as a representation of gender and lived history: "I carry my story, my personhood, even my wounds in every movement." Her words reveal how the body is not just an instrument of defense, but a performative site of self-expression (Butler, 1990). The female body acts both as witness and agent in a symbolic and social struggle, rearticulating gender through the repetition of meaningful movements.

Women's participation in *silat* marks a transformation in cultural power relations. As Green (1995) notes, when *silat* is developed within communities committed to gender justice, it becomes a space for empowerment, solidarity, and transformation (Jakartaglobe.id, 2024). The *silat* arena becomes an epistemological locus where the female body redefines itself—not as one molded by patriarchal structures, but as a body that produces knowledge and liberatory praxis (Ahmad, 2019; Flavis, 1995).

This transformation refers to the ways female *silat* practitioners come to inhabit and enact their bodies differently through sustained training and participation in the *silat* arena. The female body in *silat* is neither neutral nor given in advance; it takes shape through the interplay of historical traditions of the martial art, local cultural

expectations, and women's lived bodily experiences. Following Butler's (1990) understanding of the body as a performative field, these changes emerge through repeated movements, training routines, and public performances that gradually reconfigure how gender is embodied and recognized. In this sense, the *silat* arena is not simply a place for physical exercise, but an anthropological space in which women actively rework gendered meanings, personhood, and make forms of resistance visible through everyday bodily practice.

Beyond masculinity: Women's gender performativity in the practice of *pencak silat*

Late in the afternoon, the competition hall buzzed with tension and anticipation. The mat at the center of the arena was framed by judges seated behind narrow tables, while spectators—teammates, coaches, and family members—watched in attentive silence. Two athletes stepped onto the mat, both dressed in black *silat* uniforms; one of them was a woman, her movements deliberate and composed. As the referee signaled the start, the rhythm of the match unfolded through measured footwork, controlled strikes, and swift defensive maneuvers. At one point, she slipped briefly while attempting a counterattack, her knee grazing the mat. Without pause or visible hesitation, she regained her stance and continued the exchange. The judges remained expressionless, the referee allowed the match to proceed, and the audience held its breath. The moment passed without comment, folded seamlessly into the flow of the bout. In the charged atmosphere of competition, her fall and her recovery registered not as an anomaly, but as part of the ordinary contingencies of athletic performance. Such moments, seemingly incidental, reveal how women's bodies are already present and recognized within the competitive world of *pencak silat*.

Pencak silat is commonly imagined as a masculine domain, closely associated with physical strength, dominance, and militaristic discipline—qualities historically inscribed onto male bodies and identities. Within hegemonic gender norms, women's participation is often framed as anomalous or even inappropriate (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Yet, fieldwork within *silat* communities reveals a different reality. Women's presence has not only become increasingly visible but has also contributed to a quiet yet persistent reworking of long-established gender boundaries. Rather than merely "entering" a male-dominated arena, women practitioners actively negotiate their place within it through everyday practices of training, endurance, and self-articulation.

Putri, a female *silat* athlete we interviewed during one training session, reflected on her early experiences of joining the group. Sitting on the edge of the mat, still catching her breath, she recalled how her decision was initially met with skepticism:

> When I first joined, someone said, "Why would a girl do silat? You'll quit eventually." But that only made me more motivated. I wanted to prove that women can be strong—not by becoming like men, but because we have our own strength that is just as powerful.

Putri's account illustrates how female practitioners do not simply internalize or reject patriarchal expectations, but actively work through them. Her resistance was not staged as overt confrontation; it was embodied through persistence, discipline, and an insistence on remaining present. This agency was evident not only in her words but also in her bodily comportment—her upright posture, focused gaze, and measured movements during practice. In these moments, her body appeared not as a passive object shaped by training, but as a conscious subject, aware of the social meanings embedded in each gesture.

During one observed session, Putri performed basic *jurus* (movements) with calm assurance, combining fluid motion and controlled force. She did not attempt to suppress markers of femininity, nor did she exaggerate toughness to match masculine expectations. Instead, femininity emerged as part of her embodied style—an articulation of strength grounded in balance, timing, and precision. Her presence subtly unsettled the masculine dominance of the *silat* arena, opening interpretive space for rethinking the relationship between gender, power, and martial competence. In this sense, *silat* functioned not merely as physical training, but as a site of personhood work, where women repositioned their bodies as legitimate bearers of authority and skill.

A similar dynamic was evident in the practices of Ani, a senior *silat* trainer whose authority derived less from physical force than from pedagogical mastery. During one training session, Ani—wearing her black uniform and green belt—stood at the front of the hall, demonstrating movements slowly while emphasizing breath control and balance. Her voice was calm but firm, and the students followed closely. After the session, she explained her teaching philosophy:

> I often tell my female students that *silat* is not about brute force; it's about control, strategy, and precision. These qualities are not inherently masculine; they are cultivated skills that can be embodied through femininity.

Ani's statement was not mere rhetoric. In practice, she guided her students to attune themselves to bodily rhythm, spatial awareness, and restraint. Strength, in this context, was redefined not as domination but as endurance and attentiveness. Authority emerged through repeated embodied practices and collective recognition, rather than through gendered assumptions about power. Observing her sessions revealed how women's bodies became central to the organization of instruction and the evaluation of competence, subtly reworking hierarchical norms traditionally associated with masculinity (Channon et al., 2018; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Another perspective came from Zizah, a young athlete in her early twenties whom we met shortly after she won a silver medal at the West Java Regional Pagar Nusa Championship. Still wearing her university *silat* jacket and carrying her gear, she enthusiastically recounted her match:

> My opponent was also a woman, but much bigger than me. For me, silat isn't about body size. What matters is how we read movements and know when to strike. I've trained with many types of opponents, so I've learned to adapt.

Zizah's narrative foregrounds adaptability and attentiveness rather than physical dominance. Her victory was not achieved by imitating masculine fighting styles, but through agility, intuition, and bodily precision. In her account, power was enacted without reliance on violence or intimidation, challenging dominant assumptions about what strength in *silat* should look like.

Taken together, the experiences of Putri, Ani, and Zizah point to a shared social space in which women collectively redefine the meaning of strength and authority within *pencak silat*. Their practices form what can be understood as a counterpublic—an alternative arena where women are not merely permitted to participate, but actively shape the symbolic and moral economy of *silat* (Fraser, 2021). Through everyday acts of training, teaching, and competing, they rework gendered expectations from within, producing forms of becoming that are grounded in lived experience rather than abstract ideals.

It is within this *pencak silat* that gender performativity (Butler, 1990) becomes meaningful—not as only a concept, but as tools for understanding how gender is continuously negotiated through situated, embodied practices. The movements performed by female *silat* practitioners do not merely express a pre-given gender or operate as inherently resistant acts; rather, they function as reiterative performances through which femininity, discipline, and power are continually produced and reworked in relation to specific social and cultural contexts. Through control, timing,

and precision, *silat* movements unsettle the assumed opposition between strength and femininity, rearticulating bodily power in ways that remain intelligible within dominant gender norms while subtly transforming them. In competitive settings, women are required to demonstrate technical competence while still being legible as feminine subjects, navigating this tension not by simple conformity or rejection, but through calibrated bodily practices that participate in the ongoing formation of gender itself.

Hijab, movement: The politics in women's *pencak silat* practice

A row of women stood, adjusting their stances as the trainer counted the rhythm. Among them, several wore hijab—some in black cotton scarves tied firmly behind the neck, others in elastic sports hijabs darkened by sweat. As they stepped forward in unison, lowered into *kuda-kuda* (stances), and released sharp shouts, the fabric of their headscarves moved with their bodies—stretching, tightening, absorbing sweat. No one paused to adjust their veil. The movements continued uninterrupted, as if the hijab were already an ordinary part of the *silat* body.

It is within such moments that the symbolic politics of hijab in women's *pencak silat* practice becomes visible. In the *silat* arena, women's bodies do more than strike and defend; they become sites where meanings are negotiated, contested, and reworked. The hijab—often publicly interpreted as a sign of modesty or submission to what is framed as "patriarchal Islam"—does not carry a single, fixed meaning in this context. Instead, its significance emerges through practice: through how it is worn during training, how it holds during intense movement, and how it becomes visible in spaces historically associated with masculine strength and authority.

During fieldwork at the training ground where Putri, Zizah, and Ani regularly practiced, I encountered Dewi, a newcomer who had joined only a few weeks earlier. Unlike senior members, she did not yet wear the standardized *silat* uniform or the black headscarf typically associated with advanced practitioners. Instead, she trained in a navy-blue stretch sports hijab that tightly wrapped her head and neck. By the end of the session, sweat had darkened the fabric along her temples. When we spoke afterward, sitting on the edge of the mat while others packed their gear, Dewi recounted the resistance she faced at home.

Dewi spoke casually about the tensions surrounding her participation. Criticism directed at hijabi women who engage in physically demanding activities was not new to her. "At first, my mother objected," she said. "She asked, 'Why would a girl in hijab run

around like that, sweating? People will talk. They might see your *aurat*.'" Dewi paused briefly before adding, "But for me, wearing hijab doesn't mean my body has to be weak. I can still be strong and still be a good woman. I don't think one has to cancel the other."

Dewi's account points to how the hijab functions not merely as a religious garment, but as a lived compromise—an embodied strategy that allows participation in a space otherwise perceived as morally or physically inappropriate for women. In training, the hijab does not disappear; rather, it becomes integrated into bodily discipline. Through repeated movements—stepping, striking, falling, and rising—the hijab is continually re-situated, producing a configuration of the body that is at once pious, disciplined, and physically capable. Here, religious observance is not abandoned, but enacted alongside strength and endurance.

For many observers, the sight of hijabi women practicing *pencak silat* remains unsettling—an image that appears to contradict dominant assumptions about femininity, religiosity, and bodily restraint (Khan et al., 2014; Pfister, 2010; Rana, 2022). Yet in practice, these women do not frame their actions as acts of open rebellion. Instead, their agency unfolds through what Saba Mahmood (2005) describes as ethical self-formation: a process in which bodily discipline, religious commitment, and moral aspiration are cultivated together, rather than positioned in opposition. Wearing the hijab while engaging in martial movement allows women like Dewi to remain intelligible within religious norms while quietly expanding the range of what those norms permit.

Within the *silat* arena, the hijab thus operates as an intersectional marker—linking Islamic piety, gendered respectability, and bodily agency in concrete ways. Dewi described her decision to keep wearing the hijab during practice as "a form of loyalty to my faith," but also as "proof that veiled women are not limited." In this sense, the hijab becomes a double sign: it affirms religious belonging while simultaneously challenging gender assumptions that exclude women from physically demanding and aggressive domains (Mahmood, 2005).

Through these repeated movements and daily training routines, the women's bodies gradually form as devout, disciplined, and physically competent. What unfolds here resonates with Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity, not as a detached theoretical frame imposed upon the field, but as an interpretive lens that grows out of observing how gendered meanings are continuously produced through embodied practice within particular religious, institutional, and cultural contexts.

What becomes visible in these training sessions is not a sudden break with existing norms, but a slow and cumulative shift in meaning. As veiled bodies move with force and control, they generate a quiet disturbance within patriarchal imaginaries—where tenderness no longer stands in opposition to strength, and religious devotion does not negate bodily capability. Here, movement itself operates as a mode of expression, enabling women to negotiate ideas of femininity, morality, and authority through practice rather than explicit declaration (Csordas, 2002).

Over time, it was evident that women such as Dewi were not simply acquiring technical skills in *silat*, but also learning new ways of inhabiting their bodies. Through repetitive drills, fatigue, minor injuries, and gradual bodily attunement, they engaged in a process that might be understood as the formation of embodied subjectivity. In this sense gender of women practicioners is generated through the ongoing tension between cultural expectations, religious commitments, and lived bodily experience. Within this process, the hijab did not function as a marker of restriction; instead, it became a site where these tensions were actively felt, managed, and negotiated.

These practices rarely present themselves as overt acts of resistance. Rather, they unfold in ways akin to what Bayat (2010) terms "quiet encroachment"—the steady, everyday claiming of spaces from which women are often implicitly excluded. By returning to the arena, enduring training, and demonstrating competence while veiled, these practitioners advance an unspoken critique of dominant narratives that cast religious women's bodies as fragile, passive, or confined to domestic realms. Their bodies communicate through endurance, gesture, and disciplined movement, asserting presence in contexts where women's voices are frequently marginalized (Alsarve & Tjønndal, 2020; Channon et al., 2018; Nichter & Bordo, 1995).

In the context of *pencak silat*, bodily movement is not merely technical in function but also operates as a communicative practice that produces and conveys meaning. The hijabi body in motion becomes a site where meanings of womanhood, authority, and piety are not simply expressed, but continuously shaped through training, discipline, and repeated social interaction. This perspective resonates with the anthropological tradition of the body, as initiated by Mauss (1973) through the concept of techniques of the body, and further developed by Bourdieu (1977) through the notion of habitus, which understands the body as the outcome of historically and relationally constituted processes of habituation, rather than as a fixed, given entity.

In this sense, the body in *silat* practice can be understood as a field of praxis in which experiences, norms, and aspirations are both internalized and negotiated. Movement

does not merely reflect skill, but also carries social and cultural traces that shape how women are positioned and how they position themselves. Through sustained engagement in these embodied practices, women do not simply participate in *silat*; they also gradually reconfigure the boundaries of who can be recognized, how authority is enacted, and within what framework legitimacy becomes possible.

The arena as an intersectional space: The struggle between tradition and embodied reflection

Late in the morning at a regional *silat* competition, the arena was already dense with sound and movement. The air carried the mixed smell of sweat, resin, and damp mats. From one corner, sharp shouts punctuated the rhythm of feet striking the floor as athletes warmed up. Among them were several women adjusting their headscarves, tightening their belts, and rehearsing jurus in silence. One of them, moments before entering the mat, closed her eyes briefly, inhaled, then stepped forward with a firmness that contrasted with the anxious murmurs from spectators who still seemed unsure about women occupying this space. The arena, at that moment, felt less like a neutral sporting venue and more like a charged social field where bodies, expectations, and traditions converged.

The *pencak silat* arena is commonly associated with masculinity, discipline, and physical dominance, yet everyday practice reveals it as a far more contested space. Beneath its seemingly uniform atmosphere, women practitioners navigate complex negotiations between bodily discipline, gender expectations, and cultural meaning. Female *silat* athletes do not simply learn techniques of attack and defense; they continuously work through layered identities—as women, as martial artists, and as subjects situated within a patriarchal social order. Their presence in the arena exposes *silat* as a site where gender is not fixed but actively produced and questioned through practice.

The arena itself is not neutral. It carries the weight of tradition—embedded in *silat*'s historical narratives, symbolic hierarchies, and modes of instruction that have long privileged masculine authority (Wilson, 2015). Women entering this space must therefore balance respect for cultural heritage with the pressures of redefining their place within it. From an intersectional perspective, the challenges they face are never singular. Gender intersects with class position, religious expectations, age, and institutional norms, shaping how women are seen, judged, and recognized within *silat* communities (Crenshaw, 2013).

During fieldwork at several competitions, gender meanings became visible not through explicit statements, but through movement itself. Female athletes struck, blocked, and countered with precision and force, yet their performances were also marked by balance, timing, and controlled expression—qualities often coded as "feminine." Rather than resolving the tension between strength and grace, their movements held these qualities together. In this sense, the female body in *silat* emerged not merely as an object of training, but as an ambiguous and productive site where meanings of power, beauty, and discipline were reworked in practice (Butler, 1990).

As women trained, competed, lost, and won, they became increasingly attentive to their bodies—how they moved, how they were read, and how they learned to inhabit space. These bodily practices did not simply reflect who they already were; over time, they shaped how women came to be recognized as legitimate athletes and moral subjects within the *silat* world. Following Mahmood's (2005) emphasis on ethical self-formation, participation in *silat* cannot be understood solely as resistance to patriarchy. Training and competition also function as spaces where women learn to inhabit existing gender and religious norms in ways that make them appear competent, disciplined, and respectable, even as they subtly reshape how those norms operate in everyday life. Becoming a *silat* practitioner, in this sense, is an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a clear break from tradition.

The experiences of Putri, Zizah, Ani, and Dewi illustrate how sustained participation in *silat* enables women to rethink the limits of their own bodies. Capacities once understood as inappropriate or unavailable to women—such as anger, assertiveness, or physical aggression—gradually became integrated into how they understood themselves as athletes. These changes were not merely the result of physical conditioning, but of a broader reorientation of bodily experience, where movement, emotion, and self-perception were recalibrated within the arena (Grosz, 2020; Young, 2009). The female body was not only trained, but reimagined.

Through each strike, block, and stance, women articulated an alternative narrative: that courage, strength, and controlled aggression are not exclusively masculine traits. Gender here was reproduced through repeated bodily action, yet those same repetitions opened space for re-signification (Butler, 1990). By performing strength in a public arena long reserved for men, female *silat* athletes did not simply participate in the existing gender order; they quietly unsettled it.

This process, however, remained marked by contradiction. Outside the arena, many women felt compelled to reaffirm their femininity through dress, speech, and adherence

to family expectations. These tensions reveal the push and pull of intersecting power relations—gender, religiosity, class, and cultural norms—that continue to shape women's lives beyond the mat (Crenshaw, 2013). The *silat* arena thus becomes not a site of pure liberation, but a space of ongoing negotiation between attachment to tradition and the courage to redefine what womanhood can look like in contemporary Indonesia.

Seen ethnographically, the *silat* arena emerges as an intersectional space not only in analytical terms, but as a lived experience where tradition, agency, and embodied reflection meet. Women do not merely step into this arena; through their disciplined movements, narratives, and continued presence, they actively participate in remaking it —reshaping a martial world long cast in the shadow of masculinity through the everyday labor of their bodies.

Conclusion

This study concludes that *pencak silat*, while widely recognized as a practice of physical training and skill transmission, also operates as a socially charged arena for female practitioners. Within this space, bodily discipline and athletic practice are inseparable from ongoing processes through which women negotiate gender identities, authority, and legitimacy. Rather than reconfiguring *silat* in entirely new terms, the analysis highlights how women's engagement with *silat* allows them to navigate, inhabit, and subtly rework a field historically shaped by masculine norms, positioning themselves as capable athletes, morally grounded subjects, and active participants in the martial arts community.

Through repetitive and meaning-laden bodily movements, female *silat* athletes resist gender stereotypes that cast them as weak and passive, while simultaneously crafting counter-narratives of strength unanchored to dominant masculinities. The presence of the hijab adds further complexity to the gendered body—not as a symbol of restriction, but as a performative strategy that enables women to articulate power within religious and local cultural frameworks. Through gender performativity, the female body emerges as an active subject that redefines the *silat* arena as an inclusive and transformative space. As such, *pencak silat* becomes a discursive terrain for epistemic disobedience against patriarchal knowledge systems and contributes to expanding critical conversations on body, gender, and power in contemporary Indonesian society.

The ethnographic findings further reveal that women in *pencak silat* communities are not passive participants but reflective agents who inhabit their bodies as sites of

representation and resistance. Through the experiences of Putri, Zizah, Ani, and Dewi, the female body is not simply present on the training mat, but speaks through every breath, strike, and step—negotiating the tensions between religiosity, strength, and embodied agency. In this context, to be a woman in *silat* is to create alternative bodily imaginaries that redefine strength not through domination, but through adaptability, attentiveness, and endurance.

In particular, the *silat* practice among women at a university grounded in Islamic values illustrates a subtle yet significant form of encroachment upon traditionally masculine and normative public spaces. These women do not reject traditional or religious values outright; rather, they re-signify them. The hijab here is not a marker of submission, but a semiotic tool for asserting presence, power, and bodily autonomy. This phenomenon reveals that resistance to patriarchy does not always manifest through overt confrontation, but through embodied agency shaped by discipline, silence, and persistence.

This research therefore, contributes not only to the expanding scholarship on gender and sport, but also to feminist anthropology and decolonial body politics. *Pencak silat* emerges as an epistemological site where women craft counter-narratives to the construction of passive, soft, and domestic femininity. Within the arena, they do not position themselves as exceptions in a masculine world, but as meaning-makers and agents of transformation. The *silat* arena ceases to be merely a symbol of traditional masculinity; it becomes a living space where female bodies rewrite the scripts of power and become the locus of reflective, diverse, and empowered identities.

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AI Disclaimer

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Povzetek

Članek raziskuje, kako se športnice indonezijske tradicionalne borilne veščine *pentjak silat* pogajajo glede pričakovanj glede identifikacije spola. Vsebina članka se osredotoča na to, kako se družbeno vgrajene norme – zlasti tiste v indonezijskih verskih in kulturnih kontekstih, ki ženstvenost povezujejo s skromnostjo, zadržanostjo in pasivnostjo – udejanjajo, pogajajo in preoblikujejo skozi telesno prakso. Na podlagi etnografskega terenskega dela in pojmovanja spolne performativnosti po Judith Butler članek pokaže, da ženska telesa, vključno s telesi žensk, ki nosijo hidžab, ne le sledijo tem normativnim pričakovanjem, temveč poustvarjajo alternativne načine biti ženska v areni silata. Teme-lječ na opazovanju z udeležbo in poglobljenih intervjujih z atletinjami *pentjak silata* na eni od islamskih univerz v Džakarti članek pojasnjuje, kako se treningi, tekmovanja in vsakdanje interakcije preoblikujejo v *silat* kot simbolni in socialni prostor, v katerem se pomen moči, discipline in moralne legitimnosti nenehno redefinira. V tem smislu praksa silata ni le oblika fizičnega treninga, temveč tudi prostor kulturnega pogajanja, kjer prevladujoče spolne norme niso niti v celoti zavrnjene niti pasivno sprejete, temveč se skozi utelešeno prakso na novo artikulirajo. Študija z obravnavo *pentjak silata* kot raziskovalnega polja telesne politike in spolne performativnosti prispeva k širšim antropološkim razpravam o spolu, religiji in moči v sodobni indonezijski družbi.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: spolna performativnost, prepletanje, *pentjak silat*, feministična etnografija, ženska telesa

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