

# Open letter to Hombu and all Kenshi

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During the first WSKO Online Seminar Official Class on June 19th, Kawashima-sensei reminded us what it means to be a kenshi in the words of Kaiso himself – to be a hero for and take care of our kohai, to act as their shield.

Hopefully all of us try to do that, but looking at it from the other side I see one major problem that is still too common in this day and age, even if there has been some occasional progress.

I believe every kenshi around the world is familiar with this image: You go to a seminar, excited and ready to learn all you can from those heroes, those who came before you and have so much to teach. The instructors are lined up in front of the group and introduced, one by one. And one by one, all of them are men. Always. I have been practising Shorinji Kempo for over twenty years and I remember rarely a female instructor at any of the seminars I have attended, nor at any of the clubs I have trained at.

As a man myself, it would not be hard to simply take that as a given without a second thought. But if even I ask myself why this is and how it could be that there are so few female instructors – heroines – in Shorinji Kempo, how must it be for the many female kenshi around the world? Who do they look up to and think, „That could be me“?

Kaiso said: „Give me leaders, not followers.“ But where are all the female leaders in Shorinji Kempo?

Women are generally underrepresented in martial arts, as in many sports and in leadership positions elsewhere. But we have slowly come to realise, namely in recent years, that this is a major problem for a multitude of reasons, not just as role models for other women and girls.

One of the most common arguments by those defending the male dominated status quo is that there are simply no qualified women for such leadership roles, though that more often than not has turned out to be false when examined more closely. How about Shorinji Kempo, then? I personally know many female kenshi of sandan rank or higher, most of whom have at least entertained the idea of becoming branch masters, while several have actually tried to open up branches themselves.

All have failed or even given up. Why?

The answer is quite simple, though it is an inconvenient truth to hear – a truth, nonetheless: They have been hindered in many ways, great or small, by those in power with the ability to stop them. They are told that they are not good enough or should only teach beginners, that right then is not the right time, or many other excuses.

Those who say these things are men, often older men, grown up in a world where nobody gave a second thought to men holding all positions of power.

These older men are often completely fine with letting the younger women do lots of work in the dojo, from handling paperwork to teaching classes and beyond, using

their enthusiasm, ideas, and energy for the benefit of the group. Only when it comes to giving them actual power and status these men suddenly find a hundred problems and faults with that and them.

Obviously, this cannot stand any longer. Especially in the days of campaigns like „Me too“ and „Time’s up“, that have shone a bright light on these inequities and the powers that keep them in place.

So what do we do about this? We as kenshi, we as leaders? What does Hombu do about it, or WSKO?

Every kenshi can choose to be an ally and personally support those women we know, namely those who try to become branch masters, of course. We can make our voices heard, challenging what is wrong.

But unless those in positions of power do not open the way, there is little we ‚little kenshi‘ can do. However, I firmly believe that hombu, as the true heirs of Kaiso and the leaders devoting their lives to preserve and further his vision and mission, do have that power.

It is no secret, and a great grief to all of us that Kaiso’s amazing message has been so slow to spread around the world and I cannot help but wonder if this isn’t at least part of the reason. If half of the population does not find themselves represented among the leadership in our great martial art and philosophy, if they cannot look and see heroines of their own to look up to, maybe they are also more reluctant to join, less likely to follow this path?

Maybe it is harder for many men to understand why having a purely male leadership is such a problem. But it always helps to take the other perspective, that of women, namely those new or thinking of joining, especially younger ones. How often do they encounter behavior that goes unchecked and tolerated, but that a female leader would immediately recognise as inappropriate or worse?

Like comments on looks or other aspects based on gender that many men do not realise are unwanted, uncalled for, or even offensive. Just imagine whether you would say the same to (another) man – if no, then it is probably not a good idea. Treating women differently, even if it is meant positively, can also lead to them feeling as not taken seriously or seen as lesser than. A striking example of that are gender based categories in embu taikai, or even rules that men are not allowed to throw women. Anybody practising with women everyday knows that those are unnecessary distinctions. If there is worry about the health of a participant – male or female – they should be allowed to make the choice for themselves, not have others do that for them, based on their gender!

While it is true that our second Shike is a woman, that does not mean that gender discrimination towards women in Shorinji Kempo does not exist to this day. The role of Shike is mainly seen as being passed on in Kaiso’s family – irrespective of gender – which most kenshi are not a part of.

In the end, the image presenting itself to all (female) kenshi, every day, is that of that line-up of instructors, of examples to follow. All of them men.

It is they who lead us in everyday practice, who stand in front of everyone else as examples, who are recognised as those to look up to and to follow – our heroes and heroines.

Kaiso himself was a great advocate of abolishing any kind of discrimination.

Therefore I do not believe that he would accept gender-based discrimination in this

day and age, after all our societies have gone through recently!

I have trained in other martial arts as well, often under female instructors every bit as capable as their male counterparts, sometimes more so.

I have never had a problem with that and I have heard from many female practitioners how great it felt to them to see a woman at the top, at the head of the class, showing them that that could be them as well.

This could be us too. This could be Shorinji Kempo in the 21st century, open and equal to everyone.