

Notes from the Challenges for Women & Minority Genders in Rapier panel held at Pennsic 48

Moderator Note: Please note that women have different experiences as fencers in our sca culture. All of us sitting here may have alternative views, and different experiences, and that is ok.

Panel:

Maestra Sorcha Dhocair

Mistress Eva Woderose

Master Nataliia Anastasiia Evgenova Sviatoslavina vnuchka

Dame Brighid MacCumhal

Master Ildore de Bedegrayne

Baronesa Catalina de Valencia

Lady Nyvein bat Rav Adam

Dona Liliias de Cheryngton (moderator)

Members of the panel indicated during introductions that they had been fencing anywhere from 6 years to 26 years.

Question from moderator: “What have you found challenging as a female fencer?”

1) *Being the representation of all women in fencing.*

I feel this all the time. It lies on our shoulders that we represent not just ourselves as individuals, but all women fencers.

Only 13.8 percent of mods are women. This hurts me.

Also note that only 30 % of fencers in rapier are women according to authorization records.

There is pressure, like when you get so far in a tournament and everyone tells you that you are only the X number of women to have made it that far. This pressure means that it is not just me as an individual who has gotten that far. And if I mess up it feels like it doesn't just reflect on me but on the abilities of women in general.

By default I also become the point of contact, and complaint, for other female fencers.

2) *They expect us to fix things, but they don't listen when we say that there are systemic problems that need to be fixed. They say “just point me to the woman who is ready and we will elevate her,” but I can't do that, because systemic problems mean that not enough women reach that point. What is stopping us from getting to that level?*

3) *There are differences in the experience of men and women in training and physiology.*

It's a combination of training that can sometimes be poor for new people, but also specifically bad for women in some ways.

There is more likely to be miscommunication between male and female fencers because of differences in our bodies. Often female fencers learn how to do things wrong, and when it is not caught early, it can lead to injury.

4) *Pregnancy presents unique logistical and physical challenges for women.*

Nursing is a logistical challenge that must be managed, as must child care. Societal conventions state that mom is the default caregiver, so more of the arranging of child care often falls to them. I feel that it is more on me to make sure I can arrange things so I can go fence.

“SCA time” also hurts moms. When X is scheduled to happen after Y, but X runs late, women who have arranged for child care to take place a specific time have a significant problem when events run late. As a community we can try to support each other better by modifying our scheduling conventions.

It feels like I have had to become like a man to succeed. If im single and have a cat instead of kids, it is much easier for me to achieve a higher level of fencing skill.

5) *Being a mother, once can balance this and fencing, but it can be tough. You need to focus on gathering a community to help you, one that supports you, and helps you.*

6) *Women get pushed into the service track more frequently.*

They fill in as MOLs, Marshals, etc. Women, culturally in our society, tend to be more focused on supporting the community. This is a systemic trend.

This culture needs to change. We say, for example, that cadets need service to advance, and if women tend to do more service, it is our female cadets that end up doing more service instead of fencing, because there is cultural pressure for them to do more service.

Are people expecting a higher level of service from women in the first place?

7) *In addition to being more focused on service, the service that women do often goes under recognized*

Often women say, “as long as it gets done, its fine.” But, this is not true, because the SCA is based off of recognition.

We can talk to friends about being a better ally to help amplify women’s voices to make sure that they get credit for what they have done.

Women can hurt themselves by being invisible, but friends can work to help with that, by making sure women are highlighted for the work they are doing.

18 yr old guys don’t listen to me as a woman, but they will listen to a man. I say things and am not heard, a male says and they listen

Allies can help with this here. By redirecting attention back to a woman if something was their idea. Let people know that.

8) *Women also underrepresent their own accomplishments*

When I do well as a woman I say “I did well, but there were extenuating circumstances x and y and z.” On the other hand, men tend to say .. “yes I did well”. Full stop.

We are told as women not to boast or brag, and not to be overly aggressive. Often women talk themselves out of a win.

When I talk to myself, I often I talk down or in negative ways. Now that I know this, I try to catch myself doing that. Negative self talk should be reframed. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Stop the negative voice in your head and reframe the conversation. Try to tell the voice in your head that it is not allowed to talk to you that way.

9) *Question from the audience: “I want to make sure that I learn how to be a good teacher. How can I do that....for example, I tell women that when they put on their masks its not a male or female that they are facing, but their fencing opponent.*

But, culturally and socially, when you say fencer/fighter you are assuming a male by default in that position. When you say scribe, you don’t assume male necessarily.

I don’t want to hide my womanness.. I want to talk about how being a woman impacts my fencing. I can be a woman and a fencer.

If i’m fencing i can’t help my kids because I can’t be a woman, this type of thought has to go away.

We are all one - women and men, there is no difference. This is a nice view, but, with this view, one can often end up simply ignoring the minority.

There are very real differences between men and women.

Recommended Reading List

- The Armored Rose - dated, but still very good
- Fear Is the Mind Killer - authored by a HEMA instructor.
- Invisible Women: Data bias in a world designed for men - This is a book, but the link here is to a podcast about the book.

When I say that I can't physically do something, I'm seen as argumentative. Can men just please listen when women tell you something, like, "my arm does not move or bend that way."

- We can avoid this by creating a community that does not make these assumptions.
- My teacher is helpful here, because we can talk when something is not clicking. My teacher can also help by finding me some exercises to strengthen and help me.
- Explaining the why and the end result of movement can help women figure out what can work for them on their own.

Check your loaner gear. This is an easy thing to do, low hanging fruit. Do you have breast plates, small gloves, gorgets, masks. Do you have jackets that will fit over women's breasts and hips.

It is important for a teacher to have an individual plan for each fencer. Adjust your plan for the individual so you can get the best out of them. This works better than when you say, "all women are the same as men."

That language, the language of "I don't see gender," that bleeds into life off of the field. So be careful when you use that language

10) *The adrenal drop is a big difference for women:*

I don't want to be seen as weak and crying, crying on the field is a straw too far.

Women build adrenaline, and then plateau, so it's hard for them to come down, and often they can't easily dump adrenaline.

Crying it out makes us feel better, we need to get it out. Saying "OMG, ARE YOU OK" when this happens to a woman is not helpful

The Feminine is considered lesser by society. This is a systemic issue. This is why crying is seen as bad. But crying is good for everyone, as it can help get emotion out.

11) *I always wonder, is it because I am a woman, or is because that guy is just a dick, when he shrugs my shots, etc. I have no way to address this issue of me wondering. There is a lack of resolution to that question.*

It is an underlying thought of men sometimes that, "Well i won't take that shot if it is made by a woman." Or men sometimes try to convince women that a shot they made was not good. But, it is important for women to not let people talk you out of that shot.

I talked myself out of bringing up a hard shot to the marshals. I should have said something, but I didn't because I was worried that I was going to be perceived as not being tough enough.

12) *The default is that we have to fix the women because to be male is the social and cultural default. Men are seen as the base average. But, remember, women are not broken. It is not us that are lesser than men. It's just that we are different.*

Note Taker: Lissa Underhill