

TEN REASONS SYSTEMA IS PERFECT FOR WOMEN

by Rachel Klingberg

Systema encourages all practitioners to discover their unique strength; its core philosophy is *poznaj siebie*, or "know yourself." Attributes that may seem like disadvantages in a fight are never considered such in Systema training. A short practitioner can more easily duck and weave around an opponent. A heavy student may find the extra padding helpful when taking strikes or meeting the ground.

It is likewise for psychological components such as intuition, sensitivity, and caution. While being tough and stoic about pain is helpful in survival situations, being sensitive and responsive to danger is also an asset. Multiple scientific studies demonstrate that women are more intuitive and empathetic than men, and therefore may sooner perceive a situation that seems a little "off" or a person who may be emotionally unstable. It is that very intuition that protects us best. Systema training offers benefits for all students, of course, but the physical and psychological differences between men and women give each of the sexes unique advantages.

Below are ten reasons why Systema is a particularly good martial art for women.

1. WOMEN ARE NOT TAUGHT SEPARATELY

Systema training is psychologically challenging; women have the additional challenge of being a small minority in class. But since most violent criminals (as well as victims of violent crime) are men, it stands to reason that Systema classes are generally co-ed. The unfamiliar situation is always the

most frightening; practice takes the edge off fear and lends confidence to resolve conflict. Some forms of assault are more commonly used against women (grabs and holds) or men (punches), but that is not to say they only happen to one sex or the other – anyone can be grabbed, thrown, punched, kicked, stabbed, and yes, even sexual assault also happens to men and boys.

Some women's self-defense classes focus entirely on harnessing women's aggression. Men in padded suits are treated as the enemy to be vanquished with explosive moves and angry shouts. Rather than amping up the nervous system, Systema's fluid movements both calm and trick the opponent. There is no telegraphing in Systema; attacks are sudden, surprising, and seem to come from nowhere. Systema students learn defense against all forms of assault, but aggression against training partners is not the Systema way. Classmates are comrades sharing a journey of self-discovery.

2. SYSTEMA DOES NOT RELY ON SUPERIOR SIZE OR STRENGTH

Superior size, strength, speed, the ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound – all can be advantages in a physical conflict, but few women can rely on being bigger, stronger, or faster than an assailant. Even for men, these are unknown, unpredictable factors; it is the hallmark of a bully to never pick on someone his own size

"Scientific studies demonstrate that women are more intuitive and empathetic than men"

Systema does not advocate striving to become the biggest, fastest, strongest person on earth for personal safety (although it does encourage physical fitness and conditioning). In Systema practice we assume that the opponent will have every advantage, and drills often begin from a situation of serious disadvantage rather than "squared off."

Systema proficiency is not dependent on superior physical qualities, much less "lightning fast reflexes." Reflexes can be affected by age, illness, physical condition, hunger, thirst, pain, injury, and a thousand other factors, but they are involuntary and cannot be conditioned or trained.

Systema does not even assume you will have the benefit of vision or for that matter, all four limbs in a survival situation, and blindfolded, handcuffed, and no-hands-or-legs drills are a regular part of training. Systema does rely on touch. The eyes can be fooled; it is nearly impossible to touch someone without their perceiving it. Touch is more honest; it is also more resilient – a loud explosion can leave a person deaf, temporarily or permanently, whereas vision is lost whenever we are in a dark room



Touch is more resilient and stable than vision or hearing and losing this sense, or being born without it, is far rarer than being blind or deaf. For more on touch, see Point Three.....

3. SYSTEMA WORKS THROUGH INSTINCT AND INTUITION

Women's intuition is often regarded as a myth, or even a negative stereotype that women are more "touchy-feely" than men, but multiple studies support the notion that women are more intuitive and empathetic than men – not the same thing as being "emotional."



Intuition can save your life! Women may sooner perceive the very subtle cues that a person or a situation is not what it seems to be.

It is that very intuition that protects us best. And being the physically weaker sex, as well as ones who bear the young, women have evolved to be more sensitive, aware, and cautious than men. Interestingly, women's skin is also more sensitive than men's, which is 25% thicker. This is particularly well-suited to Systema practice, in which maintaining contact and receiving feedback about the opponent's next movement is an essential tactic. And as mentioned above, the sense of touch is generally more honest and reliable than eyesight, which is volatile and can deceive us.

4. SYSTEMA IS AN HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SURVIVAL

Systema is not just for defense against physical assault. Its philosophy of survival can be applied to any challenging situation; from a migraine headache to being lost in the wilderness. Practitioners have used their skills to minimize injury from life's ordinary hazards – slips, falls, construction mishaps, even car accidents.

Systema self-defense is not limited to physical danger from assault or accident. Breathing, relaxation, fluid movement, and good posture are necessary aspects of optimal wellness, in addition to being foundational principles of Systema. Even women who are not particularly concerned with nor interested in self-defense can still benefit immensely from Systema training for wellness as well as its methods of conditioning for mental or physical challenges.

5. WOMEN HAVE A LOWER CENTRE OF GRAVITY

Systema does not have a stance; its fighting position is also recommended for everyday life: simply unlock the knees, tuck your hips very slightly, and drop your hips about two inches down; in other words, lower your center of gravity. This is especially important for anyone suffering from back pain, as locking the knees can aggravate existing conditions.



It is impossible to move fluidly with locked knees or with your center of gravity over your toes. Most women already stand and walk in the Systema way, because women's center of gravity is slightly lower than men's. It is a position that is natural to women, but one that most men must acquire through practice and training.

6. WOMEN HAVE BETTER HIP MOBILITY

Women hips give them an wider range of motion, especially in groundwork. Women's hips and wider pelvic area are a considerable advantage in Systema. Kicks are easier to deliver and have a wider range of motion, pivots and turns are easier to execute, knee strikes are sneakier, and movement on the ground is much smoother.

That is not to say men cannot learn to be just as fluid, but simply that the physical differences make it easier for women to maintain relaxed, mobile hips.



And many women, with no former Systema training, can perform beautifully controlled and fluid rolls. Some have had yoga experience, others as just naturally catlike and flexible. Once again the wider pelvis is an advantage for women, making movements on the ground easier as well as providing an excellent range of motion for powerful, dynamic legwork.

7. SYSTEMA STRIKES LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

In Systema class, strikes are just like any other skill; not necessarily dependent on physical attributes. But this is undoubtedly the one item on this list that is impossible to convey to anyone who has not felt the soul-shocking thud of a woman's well-delivered strike that stops you like a ton of bricks.

Women can learn to strike just as well as men; having a bigger fist or stronger arm does not make a strike more devastating. Precision and timing, a relaxed, whip-like delivery, utilizing the opponent's forward motion to increase the impact – nothing about Systema strikes is dependent on having a large, strong arm.

Now if we accept that women can strike as effectively as men, we must also accept that strikes "level the playing field." When men are at close range, they can more easily grab and hold a smaller opponent; on average men are 50% stronger than women. But effective strikes can keep an opponent out of range, not indefinitely, of course, but in survival situations, even one minute can be a lifetime.

A highly proficient, well-placed Systema strike can certainly ring a few bells, and even though one technique should not be relied up, striking skill can increase the odds of ending the conflict before it gets to close range.

8. NO BELTS, RANKS OR TOURNAMENTS

The competitiveness of men can seem ridiculous and unnecessary to women, even those who understand that it's at least partly motivated by biology. Fortunately, strong ego and Systema do not mix well. Competition other than friendly sparring is discouraged; arrogance is frowned upon. Very often the most accomplished veteran instructors are also the humblest.

Many, if not most, are often relaxed and smiling, and the overall tone of Systema class tends to be playful. There are no belts, ranks, or tournaments. Belts are meaningless in the context of self-defense, and competition blurs the very real goal of survival. Overcoming the competitive drive can be challenging for men; not because men are inherently more competitive than women (studies show that in same-sex environments, men and women are equally competitive), but because men experience a burst of testosterone in "winning" situations, creating a feedback loop and biological impetus to seek the feeling of winning.

This may be why men are more prone to gambling addictions than women. The Systema class environment is compatible with the more cooperative nature of women. There is no winning, only surviving, and our classmates are not opponents but comrades.

9. THERE ARE NO CLOSED DOOR CLASSES OR SECRET TRAINING

Too often these closed-door classes are cloaked in mystery, with promises of ancient secrets to be revealed if only you "make the cut." Likewise, schools that divvy students into beginners, intermediate, and advanced, while generally well-intentioned, can have the same effect.

Because women are a minority in nearly all martial arts, the struggle to be "the first" or "the only" woman in the advanced class can seem like a glass ceiling. Of course well-managed schools of any fighting style do not allow women to be excluded from the inner ranks, but it's reassuring to know that Systema has no inner ranks.

Just observe any Systema party or post-workout pub night: students of all levels sit together and converse, and talk freely with even the most senior instructors. It would be unrealistic to say that the thousands of Systema students across the globe are one big family, and yet somehow, it's not too far from the truth. A student of one school will generally be welcomed at another school as an honored guest, and many Systema students enjoy visiting other schools while travelling. The Systema community is truly inclusive. For women particularly, who are a small minority, it's especially nice to be not only welcomed, but very often appreciated because we are few.

10. CONFIDENCE = POISE AND BEAUTY

There is no confidence like the knowledge that you can protect yourself. Confidence makes us walk a little taller, look a little more commanding, and therefore we are less likely to be targets of a certain type of criminal who spends as long as 30 minutes picking a victim who look easily subdued.

Assaults can also be spontaneous, or come from those we know (statistically, the most likely scenario) Confidence makes us more likely to prevail in challenging situations. Systema cannot make anyone invincible, diligent training means continuously striving to improve your wellness and your ability to survive the hazards of life. Rising to meet training challenges, performing favorite drills effortlessly, finally getting a tricky movement after months of practice, or just the simple knowledge that you are studying self-defense – all will your increase confidence.

Holding your own while sparring with someone twice your size is a real confidence booster, and one that's entirely possible with dedicated training. (This is also true for men, of course.) A confident woman is strong, poised, and beautiful. Note that there is nothing wrong with wanting to look attractive; too often it's regarded as a "shallow" goal, but looking good does not mean we forsake our inner qualities. The fluid movements and straight posture of Systema make us graceful, because movement looks easy. The confidence gained from rising to the rigors of our challenges of training, the calmness that comes with learning to breath and relax under stress, the erect posture of good form – all aspects of training give the Systema woman the queenly presence of one who know that womanly strength, while different from the strength of men, is just as powerful, and just as human.

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