

Recommendations for Increasing the Number of Women and Girls in Parkour

The need-to-know “Best Practices” for making parkour more attractive, welcoming, and inclusive for women and other under-represented groups; developed collectively by participants of Art of Retreat 2017 and the global parkour community.



North American Women’s Parkour Jam 2016 (Photo by Anya Chibis)

In a [recent study](#), I estimated that 13.8% of parkour practitioners in the United States are women, which is consistent with estimates from

research conducted in [France in 2016](#) and lower than estimates from [Austria in 2013](#).

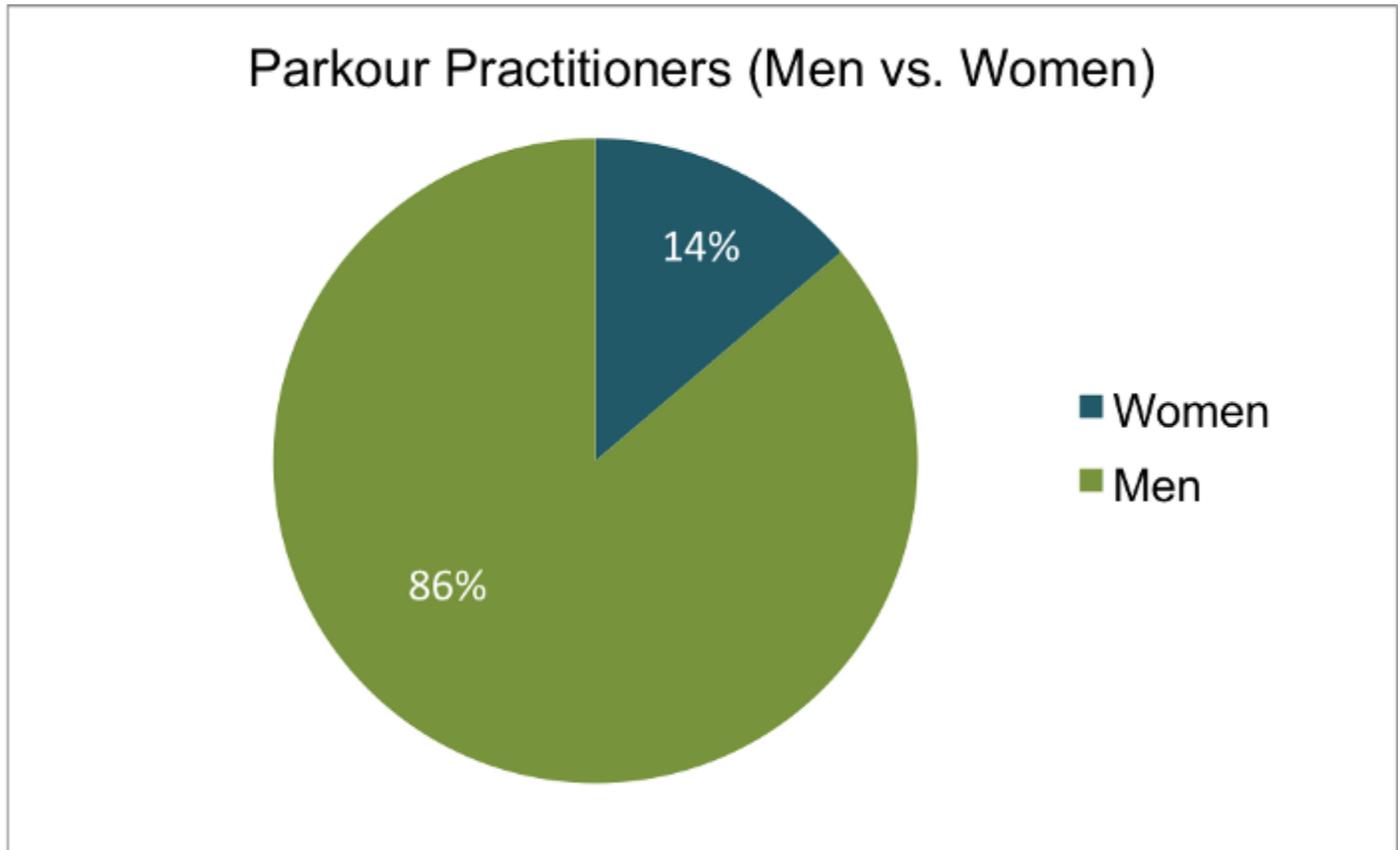


Figure 1. Gender break-down of parkour practitioners in the United States, estimated from three different national and international jams over a five-year period (2012–2016).

Now that we have quantified the under-representation of women in parkour, the next step is to determine *why* there are so few women and *how* to increase diversity in the parkour community. While this particular initiative is focused on gender, creating a more welcoming and supportive culture in parkour will hopefully foster inclusion of other under-represented groups as well.

Why so few?

Setting aside the fact that some personality types will never be interested in trying parkour, there is nothing inherently “masculine” about the art of movement or overcoming obstacles. So why is it that only 1 out of 10 parkour practitioners are women, when we make up slightly more than half of the population? Members of under-represented groups in parkour face psychological (and sometimes physical barriers) to participate, despite a genuine interest or deep personal passion for the discipline.



At [Art of Retreat](#) this year, dozens of leaders and representatives from the parkour community participated in a two-day workshop series

designed to develop *Best Practices for Recruiting and Retaining Women in Parkour*.



In the process of identifying these recommendations, we first highlighted major *causes* that likely contribute to women's under-representation:

- **Stereotypes** about women's inherent capabilities (NOT parkour) and what parkour is perceived by the public to be about (big jumps and flips);

- **Prejudice** toward women and girls in parkour or physical activity settings;
- **Media & marketing** that excludes diverse movement styles and personas;
- **Lack of diverse role models and leadership**, which compounds internalized prejudice and leaves members of under-represented groups feeling isolated, without a proper place or influence in community culture.

([Read more](#) about these barriers and the ongoing fight to overcome them.)

Best Practices for Recruiting and Retaining Women in Parkour

The following “Best Practices” were developed by 200+ coaches, CEOs, gym owners, athletes and other parkour community members working collectively in person and responding to an online survey. To read more about who participated in the survey, [click here](#) or simply keep reading to the end.



Best Practices for Recruiting and Retaining Women in Parkour

As a result of a recent Art of Retreat (AoR) 2017 session focused on increasing the representation of women in parkour, the community has collectively brainstormed best practices for recruiting and retaining women in parkour. Please take a moment to vote for one or multiple of the ideas below.

Individuals who responded to the survey selected which ‘best practice’ from the list developed at Art of Retreat was most important, and many provided open-ended feedback that greatly informed the development process. The resulting list is ordered according to which recommendations received the most support from survey participants; the first being the most popular.

The community speaks for itself. Rather than go through each recommendation and explain what it means in my own words, it seemed more natural and powerful to use excerpts from real quotes from the community. They often provide key insights, nuanced perspectives, and details about the importance of this work and how it can/should be done.



Caitlin Pontrella: a long-time parkour practitioner and creator of Art of Retreat.

(1) Develop female *leadership* in parkour, including community leaders, coaches, mentors, judges, and sponsored athletes.

“A strong community with female leaders and individuals that show a variety of styles will be the biggest factor in retention.”

“I find very often the strong movers (male and female) stick together, leaving others behind and making them feel less welcome. I think it’s important that women actively encourage other women to join in and to make sure they feel welcome and are not in the way or just spectators.”

“Have at least one woman coach in the gym.”

“High visibility examples of men valuing diversity could help change opinions and attitudes, which I think ultimately can help the sport recruit and retain more women.”



My two-year-old daughter doing a cat-traverse on a building (with help from Papa).

(2) Promote *visibility* of women and girls doing parkour, in addition to other diverse personas and movement styles.

“It is important to have more social media/video media presence of women doing parkour and related movement.”

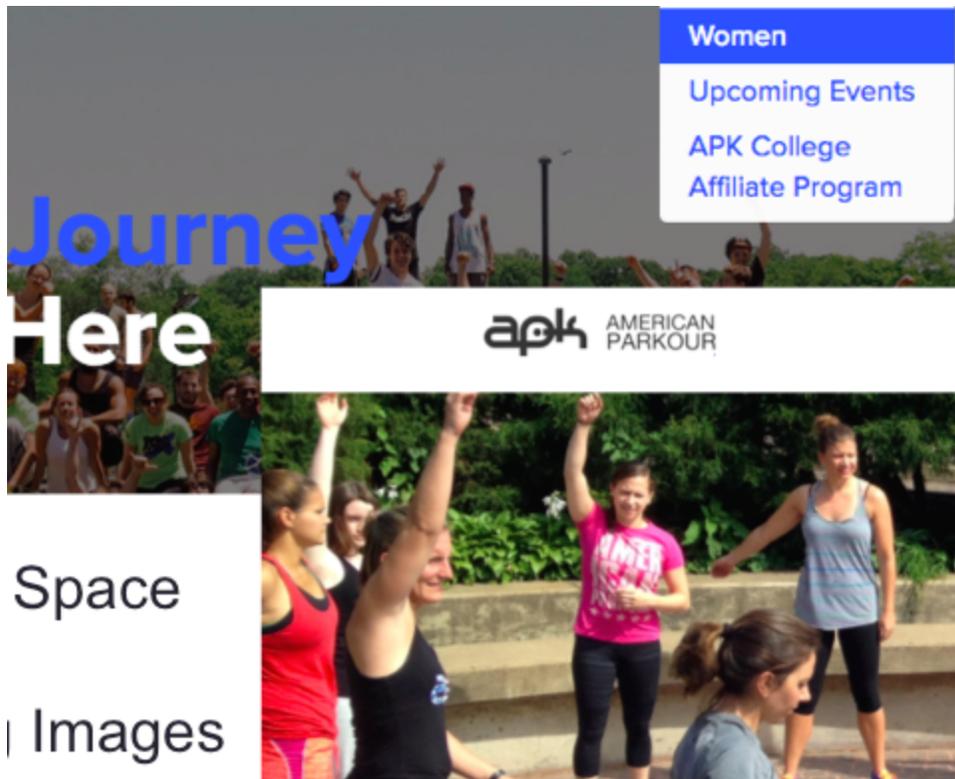
“Seeing online media of female athletes performing at a high level played a large part in me sticking with the parkour community.”

“Videos including women will help change public perceptions that parkour is meant for men- and I think will be the biggest factor for female recruitment.”

“The strategies that have personally helped, encouraged, and inspired me the most were 1) seeing videos of traceuses training together and loving movement regardless of ability level, and 2) seeing that there are fantastic, beastly female movers out there who coach and are part of the leadership/teaching part of the parkour community...deeply connected to a community and have a hand in raising the next generation of students.”

“Somehow, a young, fit man telling people parkour is for everyone isn’t super convincing.”

“People want to emulate what they see on youtube/instagram and right now I usually see all women or all men groups, rather than mixed gender groups. That fosters separation rather than inclusivity, so I think it would be cool to start an initiative where clips with both women and men [are shown practicing] together.”



The “[Women](#)” section of the [American Parkour website](#) features local women’s meet-ups, photos, and content geared toward female practitioners.

(3) Adopt and develop *targeted approaches* to increasing representation, including marketing, coaching strategies, classes, events, and scheduling.

“The pragmatic pieces of parkour are often overlooked for the flash...Most of the women that train with me want to be self sufficient, overcome obstacles, work toward self improvement. The personal journey really appeals to them.”

“I don’t like being thought of as different than men as far as capability. I like training right alongside of men. But for trainers to be able to recognize and help women overcome physical

differences that typically aren't as much a problem for men would be encouraging."

"Movements requiring upper body strength may need to be taught differently to women...Also short women may need smaller obstacles. Keep your eyes open for male students obliviously monopolizing equipment."

"Create women-friendly classes and jams. Moms want to do Parkour too and class times, it seems, are weeknights geared toward kids and people who don't have to do kid bedtimes or make dinner."

"In my experience (both my own and talking to other women/queer folks), the traditional open jam structure has been fairly alienating to people who fall outside of stereotypically masculine. I'd love to see a wider variety of events that are more community oriented than a regular class, but have more structure than an open jam to help avoid devolving into 'let's all watch those three guys do flips'."



Flirting at a jam is fun when you're in a parkour relationship (above). If you're interested in meeting or getting to know someone better, but you're not sure if the feeling is mutual, try to catch up with them after a session or online to start a conversation. Respecting women's space to focus on their training is part of creating an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere. It will also show someone you really like that you support them as a parkour athlete, and may increase your chances (or not – but that needs to be okay, too).

(4) Foster *inclusiveness* in the parkour community for women/girls and all other minority groups such as under-represented (non-binary) gender identities, ethnicities, abilities, and skill levels.

“It’s hard to find an objective and keep working at it until you get it when there are 5 men trying to talk to you and give you pointers.”

“Being in the gym, It does feel like a boys club. For someone just starting, they may perceive that only hardcore athletes can do this sort of stuff.”

“It’s hard to feel included when, during jams, your spot gets taken over by these same guys, especially with cameras, who are seen/feel/act more important than what you were doing. Quite often they do this without realizing they were taking your spot though, which makes it hard.”

“Communities that have made me feel included as a female practitioner aren’t just ones that are focus on including ‘women,’ but embrace people with diverse physical level and abilities, such as those who aren’t ‘optimally fit’.”

“The biggest problem is the overall attitude towards women and the value we place on certain movements as opposed to others. I and several other girls started training alone or left the scene all together because with the disparity between men and women in the sport. Being one of two girls in a room of 20 guys, it’s almost guaranteed you will get hit on multiple times to the point where you almost can’t train because everyone is watching you or talking to you.”



[Freedom in Motion Gym](#) teaches a variety of movement styles in courses such as Flow, Adult Low-Impact, Speed, and Tumbling. Their website also features women and girls doing parkour, which is awesome. (Full disclosure: My fiancé is the CEO).

(5) Teach and value *diverse movement styles* in and outside the classroom.

“Driving safe, practical, movement that everyone can and should be practicing gives people of all ages more room to grow and shine rather than focusing on big jumps and flips... Then the conversation moves from how big your jumps are to how amazing your technique is.”

“If there was more value placed on things women are good at, they would feel like more valuable members of the community and feel like their skills are worthwhile.”

“Classes typically targeted toward women and/or older people tend to teach critical basics such as balance, quadrupedal movement, falls and rolls, precisions, cat hangs and leaps, traverses, wall runs, flow, and strength in an approachable way that really should be taught in every curriculum, to every student.”

“Diversifying who is in the classroom can help remind coaches to focus on progressions and movement styles that are adaptable to all bodies.”



Attendees at Art of Retreat 2017, gathered for Caitlin Pontrella's closing remarks. Education in the parkour community is key to spreading and sharing good ideas.

(6) *Train coaches and educate peers about how to work with diverse groups, including fostering empathy and inclusion.*

“What I found intimidating about the typical parkour demographic isn’t the fact that they’re all male; it’s that young, male practitioners tend to have a higher range of athletic ability that make it hard for people at a lower athletic level to keep up.”

“It was really frustrating to have coaches who told me to “just go for it” all the time. Like, brah, I have ankles and knee cartilage, and I want to keep it that way — I’m not good enough to absorb that yet!”

“They (women) love Parkour and still wish they could do it. But they feel uncomfortable with how they are treated during classes. They feel they are being watched more than others, and/or are being hit on.”

“Gender non-conforming identities are quite frequently erased from conversations about inclusion in athletic spaces. I would recommended addressing the difficulties faced by other gender minorities as well as women and feminine read people in your future research.”

Noted.



You made it! Now let's see if you can finish the article to the end without saying to yourself TL;DR and giving up. You can do it!

You made it! What's next?

In addition to the six major recommendations listed above, several other topics emerged as possible avenues for increasing diversity in parkour. Some survey respondents indicated that male leadership in

the effort is critical to its success, and others stressed that increasing the quality of coaching in general, focusing on technique and progressions, would make the discipline more attractive and accessible.

Many stressed that women-only gatherings are fine, but that integration with men practicing parkour is also key to the long-term retention of women; one suggestion was to structure jams and events so that new-comers would have a chance to interact with more skilled and seasoned movers in a controlled way.

Normalization of parkour in general came up as an important strategy. When the public sees parkour as an acceptable activity, women who have been socialized to avoid fringe or extreme sports may be more likely to try it out.

Finally, a minority *that should not be ignored* expressed frustration or dismay at these efforts, believing that it is either harmful or unnecessary. It is possible that many more of these folks are out there in the community, and the sample of survey respondents was biased against their participation. It is up to everyone else who sees value in this work to communicate in a respectful and productive way with these folks, in order to reach common ground and help shift hearts and minds. (Seriously...please help. I'm sick of spending hella time in FB battles, and I'm sure the handful of other SJW I know of are, too.)

Call to Action!

In the coming weeks and months, I would like to call on everyone in the parkour community to begin focusing on one or more of these recommendations, and post on social media about what you are doing to address the under-representation of women and other groups in

parkour. You can also leave a comment about your efforts in the [discussion forum below](#).

You can start by sharing this article with your social networks and local parkour community. But then, start a conversation! Talk to your friends and fellow traceurs about how you will apply these recommendations in your area. Plan a free class for moms of your parkour students and provide childcare. Better yet, send out a survey with targeted marketing (i.e., photos and videos of women doing parkour) to see what days/times work best for them! Share a video or photo of someone you don't typically see doing parkour. Encourage local women to take on leadership roles in your gym.

Whatever action you decide to take, however big or small, it will make a difference. Every little bit counts, and you may never know what an impact you will have on someone's life. My life changed dramatically (for the better) because of parkour, and I know there are millions of others out there just like me, who are waiting to find their passion through movement practice.

Please use the [comment section](#) below this blog post to begin a discussion about the actions you are thinking of taking (or have already taken), and contribute additional thoughts, suggestions, and questions on the topic.

When posting on social media, be sure to use the hashtag #DiversifyParkour.

SURVEY RESULTS (Who participated? How did they vote?)

Demographics (the who and where) of survey participants can provide profound insights into the sector of the parkour community who is engaged in this topic, and may be especially interesting for those who participated. In this section, there are colorful graphs to illustrate regions of the world from which all **189 people** responded to the survey, as well as genders and number of years of parkour experience.

Regrettably, we did not collect age or race/ethnicity (which would have been interesting) because these variables were not directly relevant to the study. In the future, it will be beneficial to collect this information to get a better sense of who is out there and engaging with various parkour initiatives. As noted previously, it will also be important to address the unique challenges faced by other under-represented groups in parkour.

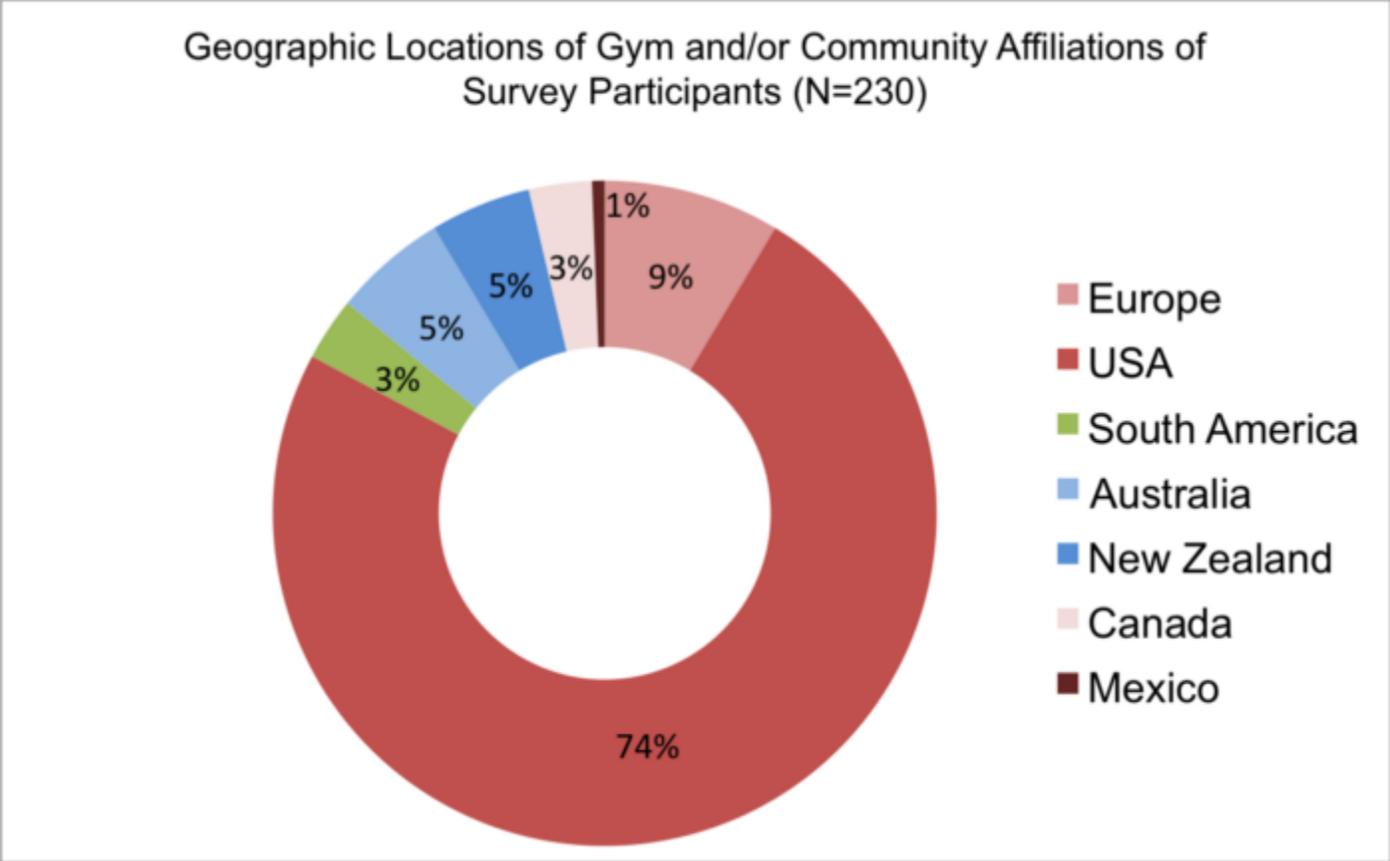


Figure 2. Geographic regions where parkour communities are located, that were represented among survey participants. Several people indicated that they are

affiliated with multiple communities or gym locations, which is why there are more communities than individuals. Many chose not to respond to this question.

189 survey respondents reported affiliations with 230 different parkour gyms and communities across the world. Overall, the majority of respondents were from the United States (74%) with 20 states represented, 9% of respondents were from continental Europe and Scandinavia with 11 countries represented, and Colombia was the only country in South America. The remaining countries who were represented had the following participation rates: Australia (6%), New Zealand (5%), Canada (3%), and Mexico (1%).

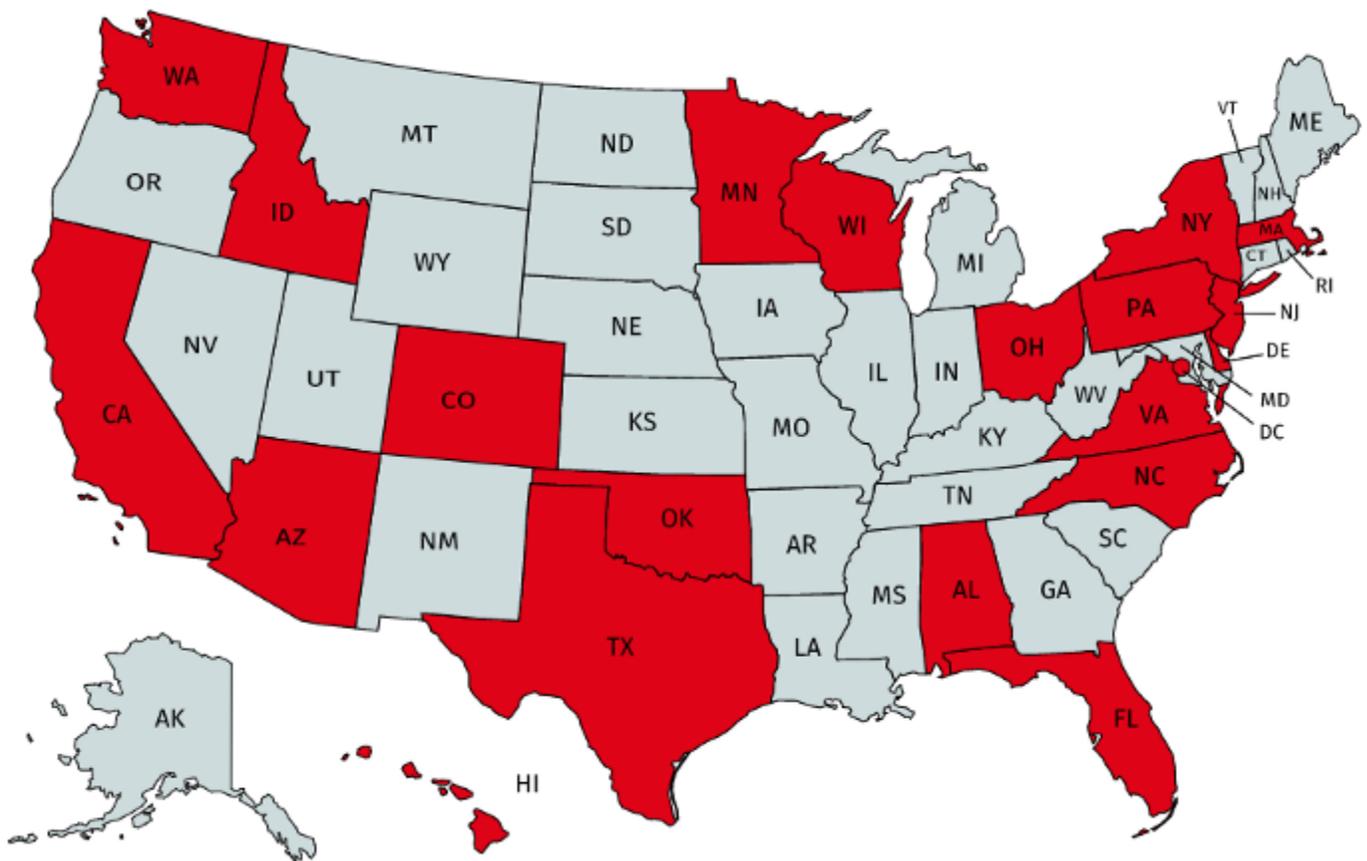


Figure 3. United States map of survey participation. Red states indicate those that were represented.

There was roughly equal representation among survey participants between men (43%) and women (52%), with 5% identifying as non-binary.

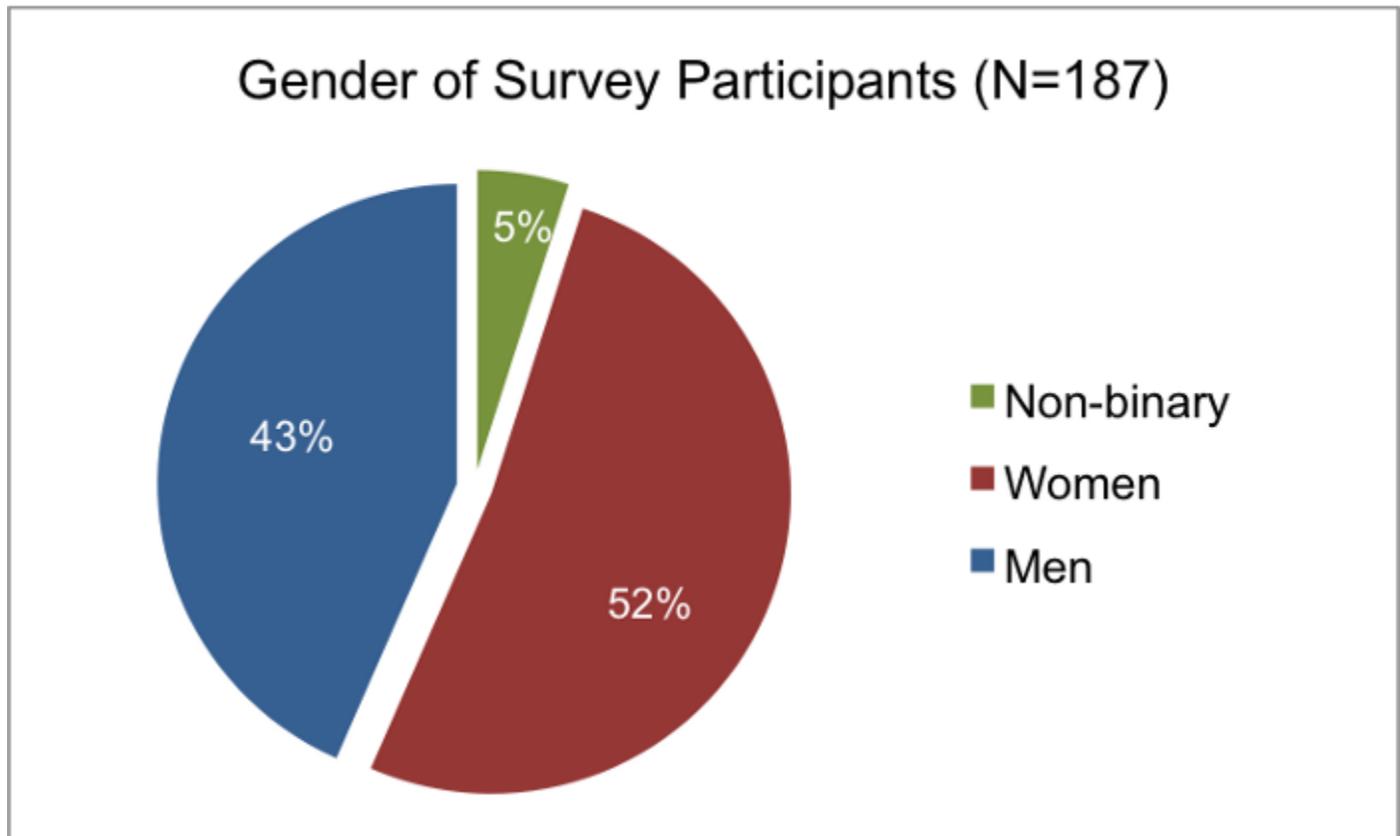


Figure 4. Gender break-down of individuals who participated in the survey and chose to provide a response.

Did men and women favor different approaches?

Yes! Interestingly, men were about 11% more likely than women to favor developing female leadership in the parkour community. In contrast, **women were about 14% more likely than men to favor hosting women-only (safe) spaces geared toward inclusion.**

Women were also more likely to suggest teaching a diverse range of movement in the classroom, continuously working to foster a culture

of inclusion, promoting a gender-neutral model of competition, and marketing parkour to women, mothers, girls, and parents of girls.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES	Total Support	Gender Gap
Share more photos and videos of women doing parkour online	66.7%	- 0.2%
Hire and train more female parkour coaches	61.4%	* - 2.5%
Market parkour to parents of girls, plus mothers, women, and girls themselves	60.3%	** 5.5%
Showcase diverse personas and movement styles in parkour	50.8%	0.2%
Host women-only (safe) spaces geared toward inclusion	36.5%	*** 13.9%
RETENTION STRATEGIES	Total Support	Gender Gap
Develop female leadership in the parkour community	59.3%	*** - 10.9%
Train staff on how to work with diverse groups of people and ensure that coaches value diverse movement styles	55.6%	- 0.7%
Continuously work to foster a culture of inclusion for women and other minority groups in parkour	54.9%	** 8.0%
Teach a range of diverse movement in the curriculum	40.2%	** 8.1%
Promote a gender-neutral model of competition and appoint more female judges	25.4%	* 3.6%

Table 1. Percentage of survey participants who selected strategies for recruitment and retention of women in parkour. **Total Support** column represents the percentage of all respondents who indicated the corresponding strategy as a ‘best practice’. The **Gender Gap** column shows the difference in percentage between women and men who responded to the survey. **Negative percentages** indicate strategies favored more often by men; **positive percentages** indicate those more likely favored by women: *** > 10% difference between men and women; ** > 5% difference between men and women; * > 2% difference between men and women.

The reasons for gender differences in favored approaches may have something to do with underlying causes of under-representation. For example, women suffering from “[Stereotype Threat](#)” or “[Imposter Syndrome](#)” may feel like they are not well-suited to take on leadership roles, while men see this as a logical approach to increasing the profile of women in the sport.

On the other hand, men may feel as if women-only “safe” spaces are unnecessary or even harmful to the successful integration of women into the sport, whereas women tend to see value in these events and classes that are invisible or inaccessible to men. One survey participant shared that she has experienced backlash for supporting women-only jams or events, writing:

“I’ve noticed a lot of men who do not like the idea of women only meets and voiced a lot of frustration about it...I find myself having to tip toe around some guys because they’re like ‘well if we had that for men it wouldn’t be ok’...I feel shamed for wanting to go to women-only meets when really I just want to feel what they feel. Being completely surrounded and immersed by people like me. Not all the time, but I shouldn’t be afraid to bring it up without offending dudes.”

Although the number of non-binary participants was too small to meaningfully interpret percentages of support for various recommendations, there was unanimous consent for training staff and coaches on how to work with diverse groups, and showcasing/valuing diverse personas and movement styles. Non-binary folks also strongly supported teaching a diverse range of movement and continuously working to foster a culture of inclusion.

Years of Parkour Experience

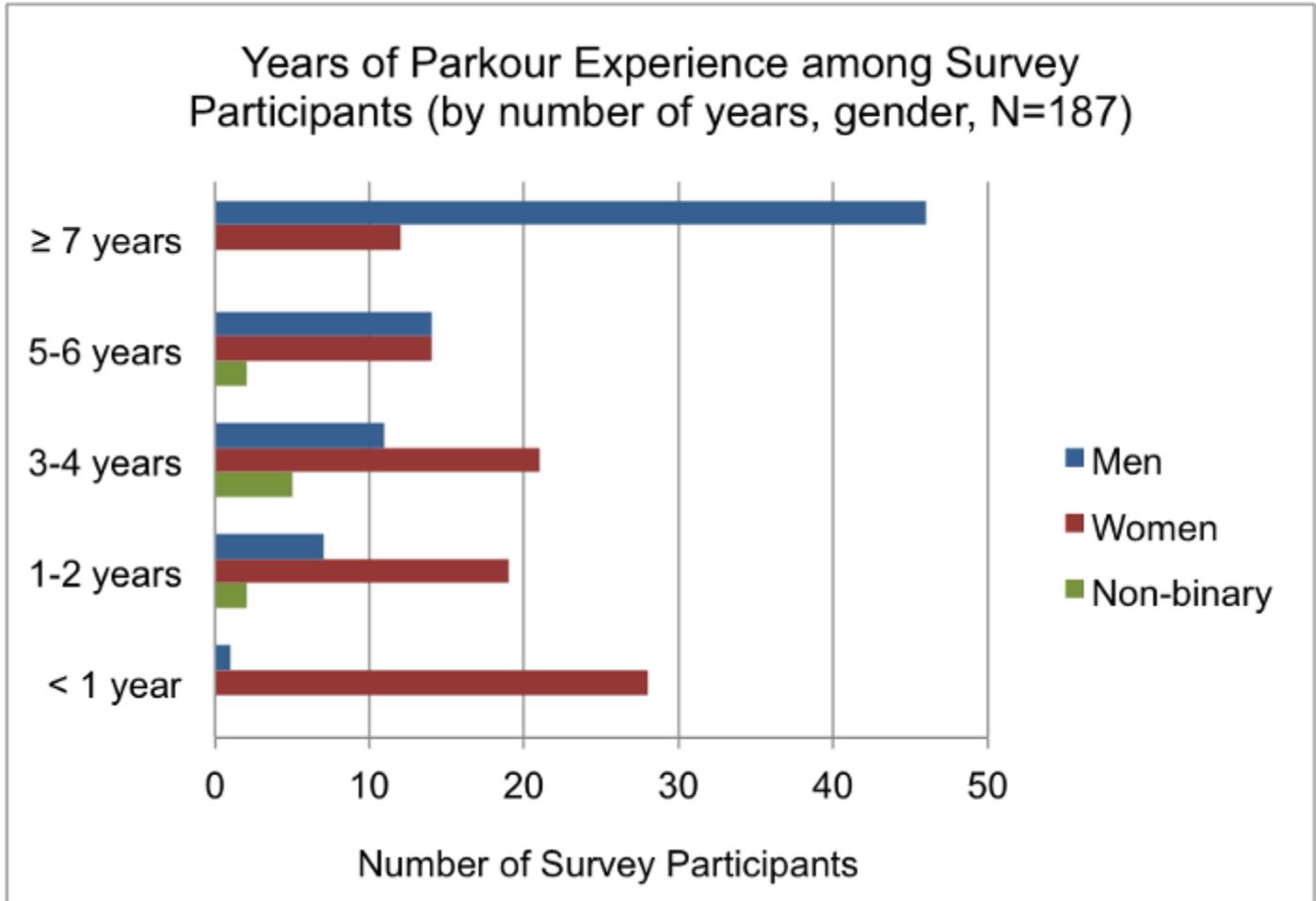


Figure 5. Distribution of years of parkour experience among survey participants, broken out by gender.

Men who responded to the survey were far more likely (58% vs. 13% of women and 0% non-binary individuals) to have seven or more years of experience in the parkour community. In contrast, women who responded were far more likely (30%) than men (1.3%) or non-binary individuals (0%) to have less than one year of experience.

This finding may have a number of different interpretations. One is that women in parkour tend to have joined the community more recently than most men; that is, more women are at the beginning stages of their training. A different, and equally valid, interpretation is that men who are more experienced in parkour are more likely than

boys or men who recently joined the community to have seen this survey and participated. Similarly, women with more experience in parkour may have been less likely to participate in the survey. All scenarios may be correct simultaneously and cannot be teased apart without collecting more data.

One final striking feature of these demographic data is the roughly equal gender split among survey participants. Considering the estimates of only 13.8% of parkour practitioners who are women, the large proportion who were exposed to this survey online and chose to respond suggests that there may be more women lurking in the parkour woodworks, but do not show up for community events such as meet-ups and large jams. Alternatively, women may simply have been more likely to participate in the survey than men.

This latter explanation is probably the case. But regardless, if half of the population is an untapped market of people who are ready and willing to be recruited to try parkour...what are we waiting for?

Thank you to everyone who participated in the workshop(s) at Art of Retreat, Caitlin Pontrella, Alan Tran, Andy Keller, and others for organizing and making them possible, Kate Miller for helping put together the online survey and providing editorial feedback, and to all those who provided helpful and meaningful responses. This work would not have been possible without you.

To all the leaders in the parkour community, I look forward to engaging with you more on this topic as we work together to increase diversity and inclusion in parkour. The world is evolving around us, [FIG is trying to usurp parkour](#), and it's up to US to keep our community together and growing into the future.



([^](#) Back to top) **Read More...**

...about causes of persistent under-representation in parkour and some common [unintended] barriers to progress.

Why So Few? (continued)

Stereotypes about what women are capable of (not parkour) and what parkour is all about (big jumps and risky roof gaps), cultural norms that discourage women from taking risks and being physical, and social conditioning that trains women and girls to avoid extreme sports or fringe activities like parkour are all contributing factors. Stereotypes can be internalized such that members of under-represented groups feel a sense of not belonging (see: [Imposter Phenomenon](#)), which can even have negative effects on performance and participation. They can also be imposed on us by others, even if we don't subscribe to common stereotypes ourselves.

Prejudice is the harmful cousin of stereotypes. While stereotypes may exist in our minds, prejudice is the impact of those biased notions played out in ways that undermine or discourage individuals on the basis of underlying traits. For example, we all may have conscious or unconscious stereotypes about women being weaker than men, but a parkour coach offering female participants the option of doing “girl push-ups” is prejudice. A more inclusive, encouraging alternative might be to offer push-up progressions on an elevated surface to the entire class without verbalizing any references to gender or age. After all, many girls and women (especially who do parkour) are capable of regular push-ups, and many boys and men still need to work on progressions.

Media and marketing also play a huge role in who is attracted to parkour, and encouraged to stay. Most images we see are young men performing high-risk moves such as huge jumps and flips, which are intimidating to anyone who is unfamiliar with the discipline. This may be an especially strong deterrent for girls and women, who are socially conditioned (and perhaps evolutionarily programmed) to avoid risky behavior. Additionally, women who have been in the parkour community for nearly a decade have expressed dismay at the lack of attention their images and videos have received online, despite having dedicated thousands of hours to their practice and media presence.

Finally, a *lack of visibility of female role models* and a general scarcity of women in leadership positions in the parkour community have contributed to poor recruitment and retention of women and girls. When we don't see people who look like us in positions of authority, we are less likely to feel like there is space for us in the field. The under-representation of female leaders in parkour may also contribute to a culture and style of movement that favors strengths that are

generally more male-oriented, such as climb-ups, power and speed (as opposed to balance, strides, flow, and endurance).

Hindrances to Progress

Several (mostly male) practitioners have [both openly and anonymously] made the case that trying to increase female representation in parkour is a losing battle. “You can’t FORCE women into doing something they don’t want to do,” wrote one respondent in the feedback section of our recent survey. This sentiment has come up repeatedly, and I have even been personally attacked for taking on the initiative. “If you really want women to join parkour, then stop [expletives]...forcing your tainted political agenda on the community,” another practitioner of “over 7 years” wrote in the survey.

Feelings tend to run high on issues of disparity and representation of women and other minority groups, especially among those who feel like their current level of power and privilege are under attack. Ironically, using the argument that they don’t have any special advantages as a reason why diversity efforts are a waste of time. Fortunately, there are also hundreds of individual parkour practitioners of all gender identities who are dedicated to the cause, and we are not about to let a few rotten apples get in the way of achieving our goals.

However, it is not just a few vocal anti-feminists in parkour that may be a hindrance to our progress. Several survey respondents simply said that “treating everyone equal” is the key to success.

While these people’s hearts are likely in the right place on this issue, treating everyone exactly the same is not a good strategy when there are underlying disparities and inequalities at play. It’s the classic “pull

yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality that is pervasive in the United States and elsewhere. This mantra tends to ignore the fact that you first must have a pair of boots to pull up; and in the context of sports and physical fitness, both nature and nurture have traditionally deprived women of those boots. Until relatively recently with the rise of feminism and the passing of Title IX, women were considered [“too weak” to exert themselves](#) physically, and it was considered “un-ladylike” to be sweaty or out of breath. That is to say, women are still just getting access to our boots, while men have had theirs for centuries.

Thus, to treat women *exactly* the same as men would be to ignore the inherent barriers to entry and success in a male-dominated sport, based on historical under-representation, discrimination, cultural and social stereotypes, and self-imposed fears and anxiety about being in the minority. While some women fall outside the range of typical female attributes physically and emotionally, perhaps preferring to be treated just like a man, this should be considered the exception and not the rule.

Acknowledging that there are differences between men and women does not mean playing out stereotypes and prejudice; rather, it means consciously adopting practices and policies that actively encourage participation. Fortunately, the parkour community has collectively developed a [set of best practices](#) to adopt that can help us do just that.



Let's do this.