

Skills for Safety: An evaluation of the value, impact and outcomes of girls' and women's self defence in the community

We wish to acknowledge all those teachers, support workers, and key stakeholders who helped to make this study of Women's Self Defence Network – Wāhine Toa (WSDN-WT) courses possible. It was a particular privilege to be able to talk directly with women participants from these courses and hear first-hand of their experiences.

Introduction

This is a summary of key findings from the 'Skills for Safety' project, an outcome evaluation of girls' and women's self defence courses run by the Women's Self Defence Network – Wāhine Toa (WSDN-WT). WSDN-WT is a nationwide network of specialist trained accredited women teachers of self defence that has been in operation for 28 years. It prioritises reaching vulnerable girls and women including those most at risk from violence and abuse, and those with limited alternative access to learning self defence. The evaluation has been completed by two independent researchers, Associate Professor Jan Jordan and Dr Elaine Mossman of Victoria University of Wellington, and was made possible with funding provided by the Ministry of Social Development.

The overarching objective of this evaluation was to understand and document the value and impact of self defence to the girls and women who participate in WSDN-WT self defence courses and to the communities they live in.

Methodological approach

An evaluation framework was developed by the independent researchers in collaboration with the WSDN-WT research team. A mixed method research design was agreed upon to assess the value of self defence for the two key target groups of WSDN-WT:

(1) school age girls participating in the Ministry of Social Development funded Girls' Self Defence Project; and (2) women in the community participating in the Ministry of Justice funded Isolation to Empowerment courses.

Quantitative data were collected from a substantial sample of girls (n=2731) and women (n=115) who participated in a self defence course run in the first half of 2015, using pre and post course evaluation forms. These forms assessed the outcomes and experiences of the participants and included a mix of validated (e.g. Rosenberg self-esteem) and customised programme specific questions (closed and open-ended).

These quantitative data were combined with qualitative data collected from a total of 51 interviews conducted with a range of school and community key informants, women's course participants and WSDN-WT self defence teachers. These interviews were completed in four case study areas selected to include a mix of rural/urban locations, and communities with different ethnic makeup (two South Island and two North Island).

Characteristics of WSDN-WT self defence courses

All WSDN-WT courses have a core focus on teaching girls and women ways to keep themselves safe, their friends safe and ways to use their minds, bodies and voices to keep safe. Learning is delivered in short intensive block courses (5 to 8 hours) using a mixture of ice breakers and games, the teaching and practising of physical self defence skills, group discussions and role plays. Some key characteristics of WSDN-WT courses include:

- over 125,000 girls have participated in a Girls' Self Defence Project course since 1996, for an average cost of less than \$50 per girl. Up to 10,000 girls participate around New Zealand each year with funding provided by the Ministry of Social Development. Over the last five years 34% of all girls learning self defence were Māori, and 51% of all courses were delivered to schools from the lowest 4 decile ratings;
- in the three years since WSDN-WT first received funding from the Ministry of Justice they have delivered 68 Isolation to Empowerment programmes to 747 women at an average cost of around \$120 per woman. This equates to around 250 women per year. Courses are targeted at women whose vulnerability to sexual violence is at increased risk due to cultural (recently extended to including a culture of violence), geographical and/or disability-related isolation.

Evaluation findings

Evaluation of the girls' and women's self defence courses using both quantitative and qualitative methods revealed an impressive range of outcomes including statistically significant improvements in girls' and women's self defence knowledge, attitude and skills.

More specifically, evidence from a substantial sample of girls and women and a large number of interviews found robust evidence the self defence courses assisted participants to:

- recognise sexual and family violence and abuse;
- understand that violence against girls and women is not okay (and never their fault);
- learn clear strategies for recognising, resisting and responding to specific violent/abusive events, disclosing abuse and seeking help, supporting other people who are victims of violence and abuse;
- feel empowered and have their self-esteem enhanced.

Several of these outcomes are summed up by this quote from a Years 7-8 girl after completing a Girls' Self Defence Project course:

The best thing I learnt from this course is "I AM CLEVER, BRAVE, STRONG" AND "I have the right to defend myself". (Years 7-8 girl)

The higher rate of sexual and violent victimisation of Māori women and girls places increased significance on the availability and effectiveness of self defence for this group. When results for Māori girls and women were extracted for analysis, all measures of self defence knowledge, attitude and skills assessed were found to increase significantly post course.

The ultimate aim of WSDN-WT self defence courses is to provide the girls and women with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to reduce their vulnerabilities to child abuse, sexual and family violence and re-victimisation, and stranger danger. Whilst this is difficult to quantitatively assess in a study such as this, during interviews a surprising number of first and second hand stories emerged that suggested girls and women had retained their self defence skills, and when needed were able to put them into practice to keep safe. Examples included:

- girls defending themselves against bullying;
- girls identifying and disclosing sexual abuse to a safe adult;
- girls and women identifying and avoiding potentially violent situations;
- girls and women fending off and escaping from violent sexual attacks;

When he was attacking me, I was panicking and everything. Like, I didn't know what to do until I remembered I did the self defence course. (Participant, teen parent unit)

- girls and women actively seeking help for friends, family members and strangers in trouble;
- women standing up for themselves and leaving violent relationships.

He wanted to isolate me and keep me away from everybody, and after that course, I went back and said to him, "No, this ain't healthy, you're trying to control me, and this is not part of what a healthy relationship is." (Participant, women's course)

Programme processes and contributors to success

Our experience as researchers was that this was an unusual evaluation experience in that the feedback we received was so consistently positive. It was difficult to find anyone with negative experiences of the WSDN-WT courses or teachers – all emerged as star players. So what are the reasons for this success? We identified the following aspects as being of critical importance.

Delivery and development of a quality self defence programme:

- that reaches those most in need, with priority given to identifying and reaching vulnerable girls and women most at risk from violence, abuse and re-victimisation, and those with limited alternative access to learning self defence;
- where courses are limited in size and tailored to meet the specific risks and needs of those attending, with special attention to being culturally appropriate;
- with course content that includes physical skills and techniques that are accessible to all, gender awareness and challenges to stereotypical views of sexual assault, help-seeking and ethical bystander interventions;
- where self defence knowledge is presented within a feminist empowerment model teaching girls and women the skills and confidence to defend themselves alongside the knowledge that they have the right to be safe from all forms of violence;
- that is delivered by well-trained, respectful and professional self defence teachers with the skills to engage participants in the topic whilst delivering an enjoyable experience;
- delivered by someone external to the school with expert knowledge of self defence;
- delivered in a short intensive block using a mixture of activities and exercises both physical and verbal;

- where courses are delivered in a safe environment by self defence teachers equipped to deal with triggering and disclosures if they occur.

Recruitment and development of high quality self defence teachers through:

- rigorous selection processes designed to ensure high quality and diversity of backgrounds;
- intensive training of these teachers, with any not reaching WSDN-WT's very high standards not being accredited;
- on-going training and supervision, including 6-monthly training hui;
- encouragement of self reflexivity and regular reviews and discussions regarding best practice;
- attracting individuals with a passion and personal commitment that motivates those involved to give far more than they are recompensed for.

Organisational characteristics and capacity:

- incremental knowledge and wisdom arising from their historical involvement and willingness to learn from experience;
- a bicultural structure to the organisation, with an important and active Māori caucus;
- a clearly articulated core philosophy shared by the teachers and uniting them in their understanding of gender violence and stereotypes and the importance of the preventive work they are engaged in;
- a democratic and collectivist approach to decision-making;
- an organisational culture respectful of diversity enabling the development of a team of self defence teachers who provide a wide range of skills and experience to draw on;
- commitment to on-going evaluations of their courses and responsiveness to feedback from participants and stakeholders;
- willingness to incorporate new research and update materials used;
- close collaboration with partner agencies and networking with NGOs working with violence against women;
- the maintenance of strong networks within both NGO and government sectors; and
- the adherence of all involved in WSDN-WT to the self defence ethos: *"Never give up!"*

Challenging issues and future developments

Whilst conducting the research a number of challenging issues emerged for WSDN-WT in their delivery of self defence courses including:

- how to overcome inaccurate stereotypical views that self defence is like martial arts, that it might enhance fear levels, and that it could lead to victim blaming;
- how to ensure sufficient and consistent funding enabling expanded programme reach, professional development and forward planning;
- addressing the 'gap' created for boys when delivering self defence to girls.

Exploring these issues with key stakeholders and course participants revealed unanimous support for the current WSDN-WT courses and a desire to see these better funded in future to guarantee course delivery. While the literature review raised the possibility of potentially negative outcomes such as victim blaming and fear enhancing effects, there was absolutely no support for such views evident in our research findings. What emerged instead were accounts indicating that the self defence teachers worked consciously to reduce fear and perceptions of self-vulnerability, and were careful to emphasise that being victimised was never the fault of the victim.

A number of suggestions were made during our interviews from the teachers, women, support workers and other key stakeholders about how they would like to see the WSDN-WT courses develop in the future. With these in mind, looking to the future, we would argue that strong consideration be given to the following:

- provide increased and guaranteed funding to expand further the reach and positive impacts of WSDN-WT courses for girls in schools so that both WSDN-WT and the schools can plan ahead certain of assured funding;
- provide sufficient funding to enable refresher courses to be offered;
- review the links of the self defence courses to the school curriculum and ensure schools are made aware of these links;

- extend the vulnerable groups targeted for the Isolation to Empowerment women's courses to include older women generally, to assist with managing their fear of attack, and women university students, given increased understanding of the high prevalence of sexual assaults they experience;
- build on the collaborative partnership established with women's refuge to extend the provision of courses specifically for women known to be living with violence;
- pilot a specifically targeted course for mothers and daughters;
- provide funding targeted specifically to support course provision for Māori women and girls, including translation of key resources into Māori and additional resourcing for Māori teachers in rural and low-income areas; and
- explore options for funding a parallel school programme for boys that would be of a matching calibre, provided by a separate group/organisation working in tandem with WSDN-WT. This course would ideally involve appropriately qualified men working with boys to address issues of bullying, gender stereotyping, negotiating consent and other prevention-related issues.

Conclusions

The overall report presents a compelling range of data, both quantitative and qualitative, that demonstrate clearly the extremely positive regard with which the WSDN-WT courses are held. Both the content and delivery were very highly rated, and school teachers and community stakeholders alike consistently praised the self defence teachers for their knowledge, skills, interactive abilities, cultural awareness, and sensitivity to sexual abuse and violence issues.

These results provide strong evidence of the importance of a range of integrated elements being fundamental to this organisation's successful delivery of self defence. Others can and do teach self defence, others can and do teach rape prevention. However, course participants and stakeholders in this study with knowledge of other such programmes routinely expressed criticisms of these, including misgivings about teacher professionalism and skills, concerns about the limited nature of course content, and anxieties regarding the management of triggering and disclosures. The strong collective that is WSDN-WT serves as a safe container for the teachers and the commitment to on-going training and evaluations further promotes the safety these women provide for all course participants.

Such attributes have developed and been strengthened during the more than 28 years of course delivery they have provided to thousands of girls and women in New Zealand. This winning formula could not be easily replicated, given how many core components are linked to its success. It is self defence **and**, as many of those interviewed said, it is so much more than self defence. Our analysis suggests it is the empowerment strand running through the programme that increases so significantly its effectiveness.

Providing skills to maximise the safety and security of all girls and women living in New Zealand should be a national priority if we are committed to creating a society characterised less by violence and more by gender equality. That is why courses teaching 'skills for safety' are currently so needed.

In reviewing the past and looking towards the future, WSDN-WT Chairperson, Alison Broad, raised the following question which we decided to reproduce here to end this report:

Self defence has already become part of the fabric of New Zealand society, with an impact on the thousands of girls and women who have learned self defence, and also with a wider impact on attitudes, assumptions and expectations. Currently learning self defence is an opportunity available to many, but still not most, New Zealand girls, and only a relatively small proportion of New Zealand women. What additional impact and transformative contribution could self defence have in preventing violence against girls and women if it became a majority experience? (WSDN-WT chairperson)

Thank you again for your help with this research,

Nga mihi nui ki a koutou

For more information on this research access the full copy of the report at:

www.wsdn.org.nz.

