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"Don't Ever Give Up!" Resisting Victimhood Through Self-Defense

Jan Jordan[1] and Elaine Mossman[1]

Abstract

Whether or not women should physically resist a male attacker has been a long-contested issue. This article enters this debate drawing on findings from an evaluation of a feminist self-defense course. It locates these data within a broader historical context to question dominant discourses around ideal femininity and explore the potential for empowerment such courses can offer, particularly for women deemed at high risk. It draws on qualitative data from interviews with course participants (n = 15), community stakeholders (n = 15), and self-defense instructors (n = 7), as well as quantitative data from pre–post course evaluations (n = 115). Findings are presented to demonstrate how participants and stakeholders from a diverse range of women's groups experienced the program. Evidence is presented that the participation not only resulted in increased self-defense skills but importantly also the confidence and attitude to put these skills into action, if required. Factors identified as critical to the success of these courses are explored, and the implications are assessed in relation to both prevention and empowerment.

Keywords

domestic violence, adult victims, self-defense, sexual assault, support seeking

[1]Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Corresponding Author:
Jan Jordan, Institute of Criminology, Victoria University of Wellington, P.O. Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
Email: Jan.Jordan@vuw.ac.nz

Introduction

To resist or not to resist? This controversial question has been posed and responded to numerous times, yet in the minds of many remains unanswered. Historically, an expectation existed that women would fight to the utmost to protect themselves from being raped, with the risk of death viewed as preferable to the dishonor and shame of rape (Jordan, 2004). More recently, evidence of active resistance has been regarded as proof of a woman's lack of consent, a vehicle through which she demonstrates both her morality and her efficacy in regulating men's sexual aggression (Ullman, 2007).

The framing of women in 20th-century discourse as inherently vulnerable to victimization by men resulted in concerns being voiced about their capacity for effective physical resistance (Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; Hollander, 2009; McCaughey, 1998; Rozee & Koss, 2001). It became a popular belief, and also traditional police rape prevention advice that women would be safer submitting to a rapist than attempting to fight him off (Abarbanel, 1986; Kleck & Sayles, 1990). Resistance, it was popularly feared, would result in his becoming angrier and more violent, causing victims greater physical injury, maybe even killing them (Ullman, 2007). Gender conditioning worked in support of the passivity stance by asserting that a woman would always be helpless at resisting an attacking male—it was simply no contest. The alternative, however, was to submit to rape, and then have her lack of resistance interpreted as consent. It became a case of "damned if you do, damned if you don't."

Today, it is still the case that most girls and women globally will never learn how to defend themselves physically. Instead, we continue to teach them to worry about what they are wearing, doing, saying, or drinking—anything that might be interpreted as risky behavior inviting rape (Aronowitz, Lambert, & Davidoff, 2012; Brooks, 2008). The fear of rape functions as a control mechanism for many, keeping them inside their homes and behind locked doors (Meyer & Post, 2006). When sexual assault comes, as it does for way too many, they typically believe they are powerless to resist or, worse, have no right to do so. In New Zealand, it is estimated that one in four females are likely to experience sexual violence or abuse in their lifetimes, many before the age of 16 (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Mayhew & Reilly, 2006). Much of the violence experienced is perpetrated by partners and men with whom the girl or woman is already acquainted. A study of 2,855 women surveyed in one urban and one rural area found over one third (n = 956) reported having experienced at least one act of physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). The risk increased somewhat for women living in rural areas (39%),

compared with 33% of women living in an urban area. When we consider the global prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women, research from 81 countries showed that 30% of women aged 15 and above in 2010 had experienced physical and/or sexual IPV during their lifetime (Devries et al., 2013). The message many women have received is that resistance is potentially dangerous, a pathway to increased violence, even death (Hollander, 2009; Ullman, 2007).

The ambivalence that surrounds resistance contributes to the often polarized attitudes surrounding the provision of women's self-defense courses. The latter have been both lauded as transformative (Cahill, 2009; Hollander, 2004; Thompson, 2014) and condemned as victim blaming (Basile, 2015; Cermele, 2004; McDaniel, 1993). This article enters this debate drawing on findings from an evaluation of a feminist empowerment self-defense course. The expected outcomes from these courses are explored including the development of self-defense skills to keep women safe but also the empowerment of women participants for them to put these learnt skills into action, if required. It locates these data within a broader historical context to question dominant discourses around ideal femininity and explore the potential for empowerment such courses can offer. In particular it examines the impact of such courses on women deemed vulnerable and isolated in their communities, seeking to understand the value of such programs as identified by them and relevant community stakeholders. Factors identified as critical to the success of these courses are explored, and the implications for women's empowerment are assessed.

Historical Context

The history of self-defense courses for women is often assumed to date from the 1970s and the impact of the women's movement. The magnitude of "truth speaking" that occurred about violence against women left many fearful and vulnerable, prompting some to urge that women should equip themselves to fight back (Pascalé, Moon, & Tanner, 1970). Self-defense courses for women emerged in many countries during the next two decades, despite scathing responses from some men and derision from other women (McCaughey, 1997; Ullman, 2007). Those opposed to such courses objected that they were dangerous in raising women's expectations that they could realistically fight off a male attacker and increased the risk of greater, possibly even fatal, violence being used against them in retaliation (Hollander, 2009). Police officers typically advised women to avoid rape by minimizing their risks, with the wide range of women's behaviors deemed potentially rape-promoting growing to absurd levels (Campbell, 2005). Such arguments invoked historical

discourses stressing women's weakness and frailty, juxtaposed against images of Herculean male assailants.

This was not, however, the first time such arguments had been debated. Whether or not to teach women ways to defend themselves had been voiced in the early 20th century during the first wave of feminism (Looser, 2010; Rouse & Slutsky, 2014). Learning self-defense and gaining the vote were viewed as complementary processes contributing to women's social empowerment. Accordingly, the argument advanced was that

> all women were physically capable of defending themselves and should learn self-defense not only to protect themselves physically but to empower themselves psychologically and politically for the battles they would face in both the public and private spheres. (Rouse & Slutsky, 2014, p. 470)

Recognition was strong that the liberation of women would be advanced by both the gaining of the vote and the learning of self-defense. Implicit in such an approach was recognition of the realities of violence and abuse in the lives of many women, and the importance played by the body in securing social equality:

> Just as the female body had long been subjected to violence and abuse, women now used their bodies as a tool to fight against that abuse and violence and secure for themselves a newfound sense of freedom. (Rouse & Slutsky, 2014, p. 499)

Although women continued to learn martial arts throughout much of the 20th century, this was in a largely depoliticized context until the late 1960s and 1970s (Looser, 2010). The clear links noted between self-defense and gender equality had weakened by the second wave of feminism, when the relationship between the two came to be viewed as potentially problematic. Encouraging women to resist their attackers invited trouble, some commentators advocated, urging submission and compliance as safer routes to follow. Not only might resistance provoke retaliatory violence, but it was seen to create unrealistic expectations in women about their capabilities. Women, it was argued, would be safer not resisting—an option, unsurprisingly, conducive to men's safety and protection of the status quo. The very concept of women fighting back threatened the preservation of existing social and gender relations—little wonder it must be resisted.

In the last 20 years, a growing number of studies have sought to determine whether or not resistance is advisable. The results have not been uniformly clear-cut, but the overwhelming majority have argued for the merits of resisting, stating that resistance might enable a potential victim to avoid rape,

while not resisting increases the risks of rape completion (Hollander, 2009; Ullman, 2007). Whether or not resistance increases the risk of physical injuries being sustained remains a debated issue in some quarters (Marchbanks, Lui, & Mercy, 1990; Wong & Balemba, 2016; Yun & Lee, 2014), although numerous studies have found that victims are less likely to be injured as well as fewer rapes completed when victims fight back (Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; Ullman, 1998; Ullman & Knight, 1993, 1995). A relatively early U.S. study, for example, found that victims who resist are much less likely to have the rape completed against them than nonresisting victims, and that the more strategies a woman uses, the more likely she is to escape with minimal physical injuries (Kleck & Sayles, 1990). Their research also established that only about 3% of rape incidents involve some additional injuries that could be described as serious; thus, the rape itself is typically the most serious injury the victim suffers (Kleck & Sayles, 1990). Since then, other studies on effective rape avoidance have shown that the combination of physical resistance (fighting or fleeing) and verbal resistance (e.g., yelling, sending clear messages) is not only associated with avoiding rape but also brings with it no increased risk of physical injury (Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; Ullman, 1998, 2007; Ullman & Knight, 1992). In one study, women with self-defense training before their assaults were angrier and less scared during the incident than women without training, consistent with such courses teaching women the importance of channeling their fear into anger during an assault (Brecklin & Ullman, 2005). Positive results emerged in a recent Kenyan study conducted with school-age girls, known to be at high risk of sexual assault (Sinclair et al., 2013). The evaluation of an empowerment-focused self-defense program for adolescent girls found no change in sexual violence rates for the control group, while the self-defense group had a 15% reduction. Over half of the self-defense group reported using the strategies taught to prevent sexual victimization, and also noted decreased levels of assaults committed by boyfriends and family members (Sinclair et al., 2013).

The empowerment focus is an important feature distinguishing feminist self-defense programs from martial arts training, evident in both content and philosophy (McCaughey, 1997; Searles & Berger, 1987). Martial arts courses typically assume certain levels of fitness and ability, stress the acquisition of specific physical skills, and are often taught by men (Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; Hollander, 2004). Feminist courses train women to use their minds and bodies simultaneously to determine the best kind of resistance in any situation, with the focus being on relatively easily learned techniques targeting vulnerable areas on an offender. Women learn how to use their strongest parts against their assailant's weakest points, and subjectively experience the power of their own voices and bodies during the program. The philosophy

informing these courses reflects feminist beliefs in mutual respect and the rights of all individuals to live free from violence, underpinned by a gendered analysis of society and social relationships (McCaughey, 1997).

A considerable body of academic research now exists showing that such feminist empowerment self-defense training has positive consequences for women, including improvements in self-esteem, self-efficacy, assertiveness, and fighting skills, as well as reducing levels of fear (Brecklin, 2008; Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; Hollander, 2004, 2009, 2014; Senn et al., 2015). Despite such positive findings, feminist politics surrounding self-defense remains a fraught affair. While some feminists stress the importance of teaching girls and women skills for safety, others are critical that this continues the historical pattern of victim blaming, placing the responsibility for keeping themselves safe on potential victims. It is argued that prevention efforts should primarily involve and target men as the abusers, and be oriented toward reducing the incidence of violence against women. There are arguments in support of both positions, and forcing a choice between these options obscures the need for a diverse range of prevention approaches to be adopted.

Learning self-defense has been experienced as transformative in its ability to change how women view and feel about themselves and their bodies (Hollander, 2004). As noted earlier, a common consensus is that fighting back provides an opportunity to avoid being raped, without increasing the severity of the attack (Hollander, 2014; Thompson, 2014; Ullman, 1998). More significantly, it rejects the gender stereotyping that depicts women as ever-vulnerable victims, and challenges beliefs in men's entitlement to sex. It is for reasons such as this, it is argued that self-defense training should be recognized and funded as an effective form of primary rape prevention.

As noted by Gidycz and Dardis (2014), however, the outcome literature on these courses has been largely notable by its absence until very recently. The evaluation research that does exist demonstrates significantly positive findings for participants (Brecklin, 2008; Hollander, 2014; Orchowski, Gidycz, & Raffle, 2008). Also emerging is convincing evidence of reduced rates of sexual victimization resulting from women's participation in feminist self-defense programs. A mixed-methods study of a university-based feminist self-defense course found, after a 1-year follow-up, that the women who participated in the course were less likely to experience sexual assault and more confident in their abilities to resist such assaults effectively than similar women who had not taken such a class (Hollander, 2014). Hollander (2014) concluded,

> Virtually every other prevention strategy has proved ineffective at reducing sexual victimization. If self-defense training reduces women's subsequent risk

> of sexual assault, it would provide an effective and fairly simple way to reduce women's vulnerability to violence. (p. 264)

Similar positive findings also emerged from an internationally hailed research study involving nearly 900 women from three Canadian universities (Senn et al., 2015). Half of the women were randomly selected to undertake a 12-hr resistance and self-defense program, while the control group received instead brochures offering prevention advice. The research found that, 1 year later, the incidence of reported rape among women who took the program (5.2%) was just under half that of the women in the control group (9.8%), while the gap in incidents of attempted rape was even wider (3.4% vs. 9.3%). These outcomes demonstrate that as well as improving confidence and self-esteem, a robust self-defense program can reduce actual rates of sexual victimization.

To date, the majority of the research and evaluations have involved U.S. college students. This is in direct response to growing awareness regarding the high prevalence of campus sexual assault (Fisher, Daigle, & Cullen, 2009). In trying to fulfill their obligations under the Clery Act to demonstrate their commitment to reducing sexual violence, many colleges have begun offering self-defense courses to women students. Recent commentators have suggested that specialized self-defense training should be provided for victims of child sexual abuse to help reduce their risks of future revictimization (Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; Ullman, 2014), risks we know otherwise run high (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2012). This article is based on results from an evaluation of self-defense courses provided by Women's Self Defence Network–Wāhine Toa (WSDN-WT) to particular groups of women from diverse communities deemed at elevated risk of sexual violence in New Zealand.

"Isolation to Empowerment" Courses

The WSDN-WT has been the single national network in New Zealand providing self-defense classes for more than 25 years, and the authors of this article undertook an evaluation of their programs in 2015. This evaluation sought to obtain feedback from girls and women participating in courses offered in the first half of the year. One strand of the research focused on the Girls' Self-Defense Project, with the second part of the evaluation considering the course experiences of adult women in the community. In this article, we present and discuss the findings only in relation to the courses held for women in the community.

The women's courses were those supported by a relatively recent government initiative providing funding for sexual violence primary prevention

projects. WSDN-WT was contracted to provide "Isolation to Empowerment" courses for women who were deemed at particular risk of violent victimization due to heightened vulnerability factors. Research has identified isolation as a risk factor (Dutton & Goodman, 2005), with isolation defined in both physical and social terms. For this study, it included women who (a) lived in rural areas, (b) were migrants or refugees, (c) had physical or cognitive impairment, (d) identified as Māori, or (e) were isolated as a result of previous victimization. The last category was included because of the high risk of repeat victimization experienced by women living with violence, and following positive findings from an earlier pilot study offered through collaboration between WSDN-WT and Women's Refuge (Mossman & Jordan, 2013). Unfortunately, the latter group were not included in the quantitative analysis as there were no courses run for this particular group during the evaluation period; however, participants from an earlier Refuge course did participate as interviewees.

These courses are always run in collaboration with community groups and agencies, including Women's Refuge, Migrant Support, Rural Women, and Rape Crisis agencies. Representatives from the partner agencies are encouraged to participate in the self-defense courses alongside the women they have recruited. Their participation enables them to provide specialist support to women, if required, during and after the course. As per standard WSDN-WT processes, these community groups are responsible for recruiting participants for their respective courses using their own networks. These groups then approach WSDN-WT to run the courses. All women's courses are run by a women instructor; all courses have similar class sizes and are of a similar length (6-8 hr usually run over 2 days). The core aims and content are the same for all courses, but with the delivery and some details tailored to suit the specific needs, strengths, and abilities of the participants. The four core components are as follows:

- awareness discussions related to sexual violence: for example, "victim"/"attacker" dynamics, power and control issues, recognizing and responding to early signs of potential violence;
- self-esteem and confidence building: building the belief in one's own abilities to deal effectively with situations of potential/actual risk of sexual violence;
- strategies to keep/get safe: from sexual violence, including cyber sexual violence (Internet, text, etc.); and
- physical skills and strategies: for example, strong voice, learning vulnerable points, grab and strangle releases, defenses from ground position, defenses from weapon attacks, and so on.

The evaluation framework was developed by the researchers working in collaboration with a WSDN-WT research team and incorporated a mixed-methods research design. Quantitative data were obtained from all women attending WSDN-WT courses in the first half of 2015 (n = 115) using pre- and postcourse evaluation forms to assess the outcomes and experiences of the participants. The self-defense instructor described the purpose of the evaluation to participants and assured that they were aware that participation in the evaluation was voluntary and would not affect their ability to participate in the course (no participants declined to participate in the evaluation). The courses were run over 2 days in community halls, and the first evaluation was completed on-site at the beginning of Day 1 and the second at the close of the course on Day 2.

The pre- and postevaluation forms consisted of a 1-page evaluation form completed by course participants at the beginning and at the end of the course. The women were asked the extent to which they agreed with eight statements that reflected the key objectives of the program. There were five response options from 0 to 4, where 0 = *strongly disagree* and 4 = *strongly agree*. Objectives included the following:

- knowledge around sexual violence;
- recognizing early signs of violence;
- belief that women can defend themselves against men;
- knowing how to keep safe;
- confidence to use self-defense strategies: (a) physical, (b) verbal, and (c) mental decision making; and
- knowing how to seek support for self and others if needed.

Pre–post evaluations were collected from the following WSDN-WT targeted courses:

- migrant and refugee (four courses, n = 68);
- rural (two courses, n = 18);
- wāhine Māori (one course, n = 10); and
- disability—brain injury and hearing impaired (two courses, n = 19).

To obtain fuller accounts, these data were complemented by qualitative material obtained from 15 participants. This included three focus groups of women who had participated together on a course (one with four participants and two with two participants) and seven one-on-one interviews. Every partner organization involved with running a women's self-defense course in the first half of 2015 was consulted in relation to the research project and potential

involvement of the women participants associated with their organization. Women focus group participants and interviewees were selected and approached in the first instance by the partner agency that collaborated in the delivery of the WSDN-WT course. They were provided with information on the research and asked for their permission for a researcher to contact them. These interviews were all conducted in the second half of 2015, and were carried out in four case study areas selected to include a mix of rural/urban locations, and communities with a different ethnic makeup (two South Island and two North Island locations).

Interviews with community stakeholders (n = 15) in the same case study areas provided an important community-based perspective on the value of these courses (e.g., Women's Refuge, Migrant Support, Rural Women, Rape Crisis, court workers, and other community stakeholders). Interviews were sought with at least one representative from a partner agency associated with each type of women's course. Twelve of the 15 community stakeholders interviewed had themselves participated in the WSDN-WT courses held in their area, so they could reflect both on their own experiences of being participants as well as their knowledge and observations of how the course affected women from their agencies. Interviews were carried out in the same locations and time frames as described above for women course participants.

A further six interviews were conducted with self-defense teachers in the case study areas, plus an interview with the chairperson of WSDN-WT, all of which provided additional useful information regarding program content and delivery, selection and training of teachers, and the aims and philosophy informing the organization.

All qualitative interview data were analyzed for emerging themes assisted by the NVivo software. Quantitative data (pre–post course evaluations) were analyzed using appropriate repeated-measures statistical tests (e.g., t tests) following data cleaning and evaluation of any violations of test assumptions.

Course Outcomes

Outcomes for the women's Isolation to Empowerment courses were evaluated by looking at changes in participants' ratings of their skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior from the beginning to the end of the course.

A total of 115 women attended nine courses in the first half of 2015 and participated in the evaluation. This included four migrant/refugee courses, two rural, two disability-related, and one Māori-focused course. Of the 115 women who attended the courses, 97 completed both the pre- and postevaluation forms. Their group means for pre- and postratings are presented in Figure 1, and results from t tests are presented in Table 1.

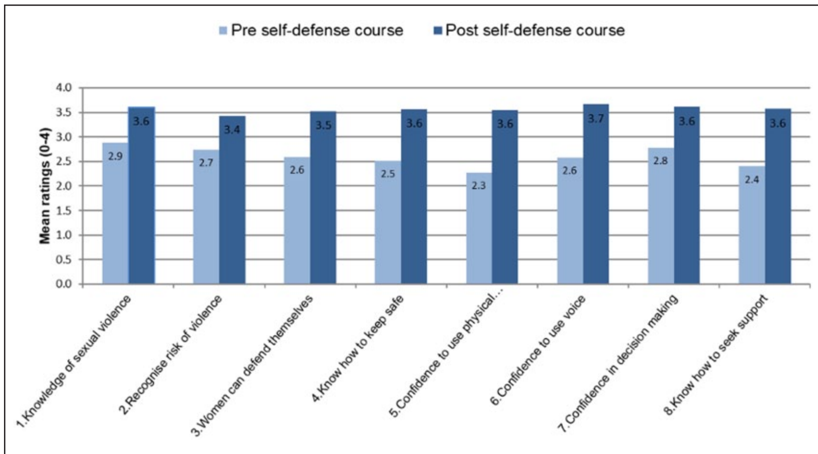

Figure 1. Course outcomes for women's self-defense courses.

Table 1. Pre–Post Program Changes for Isolation to Empowerment Course Participants.

Course Objective	Preprogram *M* (*SD*)	Postprogram *M* (*SD*)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1. Knowledge of sexual violence	2.9 (1.0)	3.6 (0.6)	7.5	96	.000
2. Recognize risk of violence	2.7 (0.9)	3.4 (0.7)	8.6	96	.000
3. Belief that women can defend themselves	2.6 (1.1)	3.5 (0.8)	8.9	95	.000
4. Know how to keep safe	2.5 (0.9)	3.6 (0.6)	11.7	96	.000
5. Confidence to use physical strategies	2.3 (1.0)	3.6 (0.7)	11.9	95	.000
6. Confidence to use voice	2.6 (1.0)	3.7 (0.6)	11.6	96	.000
7. Confidence in decision making	2.8 (0.9)	3.6 (0.6)	9.4	95	.000
8. Know how to seek support	2.4 (1.1)	3.6 (0.7)	11	96	.000

Note. Levene's test for equality of variances was not statistically significant, so a *T*-score for "equal variances" was used.

What can be clearly seen from this graph is that, as a group, ratings on all course objectives increased following the program. Shifts were greatest in relation to confidence to use physical strategies and knowing how to seek support. As seen in Table 1, all shifts were statistically significant improvements according to a series of paired-sample *t* tests ($p < .01$). The findings in relation to five specific outcome measures emerging from the qualitative data analysis and supported by quantitative findings are presented below.

Increased Confidence

The most consistently identified outcome across all of those interviewed was the increased confidence levels experienced by participants in the WSDN-WT self-defense courses. In fact, this was identified by every key informant and course participant interviewed. This supports evaluations made over the years by partner organizations and also the pre–post course ratings by women participants (see Figure 1). Importantly, the increase in confidence noted by interviewees was also seen to increase the likelihood of women disclosing to others and seeking help if facing threat or danger.

All participants said that their confidence levels had increased significantly as a result. A government social worker reflected,

> It gave me a lot more confidence . . . You know how you're brought up to always be polite? I think for the first time it gave me permission to fight back. Yeah, and I think especially in the professional role because I've been a social worker for a long time, you always want to present as being professional. The code of conduct for working for the [government department] is that you maintain that conduct in your personal life as well, so I'd never even thought about gaining permission not to be polite. You know, if I was being attacked, I would have a totally different stance now to what I probably would have had back then. (Participant)

Some spoke of how the attitude of the self-defense teachers encouraged them to grow in confidence. One former course participant said,

> I think because of her confidence, it made me feel confident, because she was sort of radiating that. (She) was talking about when she was at a bar one night and a man came up behind her and was pressing very close to her and how she just brought her leg up and stomped on his toes. Like having the confidence to do that without worrying about offending somebody. (Participant)

Another described how she now felt more confident in public spaces where previously, because of her own victimization history, the very sight of men could be disempowering:

> If I saw a man mowing a lawn on the side of the road, I would cross over. Because to me, all those men have got power. If they're in a group, they're in power. Man's got a lawnmower? He could run you over, you know? Stupid things go through your mind when you've been abused. Now I don't do that. Now I just keep walking and if they don't want to split then I stand my ground. I don't move. And I used to move out of people's way all the time. Now I think,

> why should I? I've got as much right to be on the street as everyone else has. They can walk round me. (Participant)

Women's refuge workers from other centers spoke similarly about the changes they observed in clients who had attended the course:

> Standing taller, I suppose, head up. They were very excited when they finished. Excited about what they'd learnt. I'm sure there are more words than confident, but that's the one that—more confidence than what they went in with, that's for sure. (Stakeholder)

Confidence to Seek Help

Breaking the silence and seeking help is often the first step to safety, yet one of the most difficult steps many women ever make. Some women course participants spoke explicitly of how they felt more confident not only to act in their own defense but to be ethical bystanders if they noticed other women in danger. One expressed it this way:

> I now know that if I went out on the street today and saw some guy smacking some woman that I could probably step in. Before I would think, "Oh shit, I've been there. I know how she feels." But it's sort of like, could I step in? Could I ask her if she's okay? Ask her if she wants any help first? Before I wouldn't do that. And if she says no, she doesn't need any help, then just observe. And if she does need help then I would try and walk her away, because two women are stronger than one. Before I wouldn't be able to do that, if I hadn't done these courses. (Participant)

Empowerment

In addition to confidence, reference was often made to the closely related concept of empowerment, with at least half of all those interviewed specifically using this term to describe how they perceived the impact of the course on participants. Many indicated by their comments that they saw empowerment as a necessary step toward women accepting they have a right to be safe from all forms of violence. Women who had their own previous histories of victimization often spoke directly of how it empowered them:

> What that course did for me was, it empowered me. It gave me faith in myself and confidence that I would be able to survive the situation. I may not. You know, you can still get very badly hurt or killed or whatever, but at least I'd have a chance. It does empower you. You did feel—stand strong and think you

> walk out of here and you're not going to touch my handbag, touch me, touch anything. (Participant)

Changing the terms used to describe themselves, such as "victim," was itself experienced as empowering by some participants, with one saying,

> She (WSDN-WT teacher) changed it from victim to survivor, that's what made the difference, and that empowered you straight off from there. Well I'm not a victim, "Oh my god I am a survivor—you're right, and I can do this," and it was like taking control of yourself again. (Participant)

Some spoke of how powerful and healing it was simply to experience feelings of empowerment after years of victimization and low self-esteem:

> I think for me, it wasn't just the techniques, or the part we did on healthy and unhealthy relationships, or even the statistics—which were quite shocking, of the ages of vulnerability—but it was the empowerment, I felt, as women who have been abused in many ways know, that power is taken away from you, and it's really hard to get back, especially when it's ongoing. So to feel that empowered afterwards, it helped with the healing process. And you know that now that you've learnt these techniques, and they are easy—no one can ever take that power away from you again. And that was the most important thing I took away from it—was that sense that I had my power back, no one can hurt me. (Participant)

Voice/Using Voice

Verbal resistance is often recognized as an effective rape resistance strategy when expressed powerfully and in tandem with other strategies (Bart, 1984; Ullman, 1998, 2007). All of the participants and support workers for the women's courses referred to an increased confidence to use the voice to be assertive and/or to seek help. For some, this began with the simple realization of how much noise they could actually make.

> When you start, (WSDN-WT teacher) she actually gets us to make these statements, of course, and we're sort of quiet mice. It's very quiet when they start to talk, even me, and she just encourages it to become louder and louder and to be more free and actually vocalizing and practising that, the practical application of that, is actually quite hard. And quite challenging. And very liberating once you can do it. (Participant)

Women often expressed initial anxiety about being loud and shouting out. Said one,

> It was that voice thing, I mean, gosh, I needed to actually yell and I didn't know, and I'd never heard myself yell like that before in a room of people and hearing other people yell and then towards the end all I wanted to do was be yelling, "Whoa!" That's what I meant by find your voice. (Participant)

Many also referred to the significance for women of being encouraged to say "no" to behaviors they did not like. Even simply saying "No" to the self-defense teacher was a massive struggle for some participants. One woman recalled her experience:

> She sits there and she gets us to yell out "no." And of course we all go, "no" [whispered]. She goes, "I didn't hear you," and she'll keep going until she thinks that you're all at that point. Then I think one part of it, individually, she went around the room and got you to yell out "NO" to her. That bit felt quite horrible because she was right in your face and you had to yell "no" at her. I don't really want to do that. The most empowering thing that she taught us that day was our voice . . . It makes you 10 feet tall because even though "no" is a two-letter word, it is a very hard word to say. (Participant)

Some women spoke of how hard they struggled to overcome decades of silencing, and how much they appreciated and needed encouragement from WSDN-WT teachers to change their behavior. One woman, for example, told us,

> I wouldn't say boo. Because that's what we were taught when we were kids being abused. You don't talk, you just shut your mouth. Don't say nothing. (Participant)

This was reinforced by a women's refuge manager who, when asked what were the greatest benefits she saw in her clients, replied,

> Probably the biggest gain would be, I'm thinking, to be vocal. To not be afraid to yell out, to call out, to scream, whatever it is they need to do. Because for the bulk of them, over the years they haven't had that voice, they've had to keep quiet. They haven't even been able to tell often friends, family or anyone what's been happening to them, let alone yell out or call out for help when things were happening to them. So to have that confidence to be able to call out, yell for help, and know that you can do it is huge. (Stakeholder)

Learning Self-Defense Skills and Techniques

Participants and community workers alike praised the ways the WSDN-WT teachers taught them physical self-defense skills. The emphasis was clearly on acquiring skills for self-protection rather than aggression, and the skills

were taught in a way that made them attainable by women of all ages and capabilities. They particularly valued the emphasis placed on having every woman practise the techniques until she felt body-confident doing them. Some participants were amazed at how skilled they could become so quickly when being taught the specific safety moves. Somewhat tentatively, one woman said,

> I probably shouldn't have this on tape, but when I went home, I said to my partner, "Now I'm going to lie on the bed, pretend to rape me." "What?" And so he got on top and our little boy got on top of him. Well, I just did the manoeuvre that they said, next thing he flipped off—my partner did—and banged his head on the drawers next to the bed, and my little boy went flying. I was like, "Oh, that works." (Participant)

Women in the focus groups often recounted a range of ways in which they felt they now knew how to look after themselves. The physical skills were but one of a range of components they identified, with many speaking of different measures they now took around their own safety and security. One woman, for example, said she made herself consciously notice more details about people she passed on the street or saw lurking in her area. Another spoke of ensuring that if she was the last one at work, she would now make sure the door was locked, and would also lock the door on her way out if she knew she was leaving her coworker alone. A third simply said she walked taller with her handbag better secured and car keys at the ready. Such examples illustrate the range of safety measures the women were inspired to adopt as a result of doing the WSDN-WT course. They felt, they said, more prepared and confident for whatever might happen:

> The fact we could do as much as we possibly could do to prevent something. It's not to say that it won't actually occur but, you know? You now have these tools where you can do as much as possible to hurt the sods. (Participant)

The importance of focusing on what could be done *by* them instead of *to* them was further reinforced for us as interviewers when one of the WSDN-WT teachers described how she encourages and equips girls and women in every course to think about their options when confronted by an attacker. In discussing a case where a man abducted, injured, and raped a woman, we asked her what, if anything, someone could do in that situation, imagining the answer in such an extreme context might be "nothing." Her response was that in even the most extreme situation, the most important thing is to never give up:

> . . . yes, a huge amount of pain, huge amount of fear, huge amount of shock. Don't ever give up. Don't ever give up. What can she use on her body? Keep yelling. Punch, eye poke, go for the vulnerable places, make it as time consuming as possible for him to get you in the car. It might be in a public place. There might be residential houses around. God, if it happens, don't ever give up. Don't ever give up. (Instructor)

In addition to the women's accounts of the physical techniques they learned, what we heard expressed many times was that those who did the WSDN-WT course surprised themselves at how much they retained in the months and years following. Some provided examples of how, when suddenly confronted with potential danger, they experienced the whole course running through their heads. Others spoke in ways suggesting that the confidence they gained from doing the course was the most significant factor, enabling them to access a sense of their own power when attacked and not be paralyzed by fear.

From our interviews and observations, we considered it likely that the wide range of ways knowledge is imparted and skills practiced during the course significantly contributes to the retention of information. The WSDN-WT self-defense teachers present course participants with a well-planned and delivered mix of verbal and visual information, with the physical practicing of self-defense skills being an important component. The knowledge obtained is acquired using both mind and body, and the embodied nature of the learning provides an experience of empowerment not possible by conceptual learning alone. The findings suggest that being able to feel and directly experience the power of their voices and the strength of their bodies serves to embed the messages deep within course participants' knowing and sense of self, able to be accessed when needed.

Some of the women most dramatically affected were those who had previous experiences of violence and victimization. Being effective with this group is crucially important as we know prior victimization puts women at increased risk of repeat victimization (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2012). Support workers interviewed often expressed confidence in the abilities of the WSDN-WT teachers to recognize and validate previous victimization experiences. One refuge manager observed in relation to this process:

> I think it's done really well. I think it's done very respectfully, and I know that the woman who facilitates, runs the groups, is very respectful to what people may have been through and also has a really great knowledge.
>
> She knows what she's doing, she knows what she's talking about, she knows the effects of the trauma, and if there are any disclosures or anything else, she knows how to deal with all of that, so it's with a lot of confidence that we can

> refer women and know that they will be looked after. And if they need anything more, then she'll let us know and we can follow up on that. (Stakeholder)

Outcomes for Diverse Groups

As part of our evaluation we interviewed key stakeholders from partner agencies for each of the vulnerable groups targeted for specific programs. All were unanimous in the positive evaluations they gave to the course in terms of content and delivery, with high praise given to the self-defense teachers for the ways in which they adapted course presentation and contents to meet the needs of diverse groups (while retaining core components). This included, for example, adapting the course to be accessible and empowering for women with disabilities, encouraging a focus on what they were able to do rather than what they could not. Wheelchairs, walking sticks, mobility scooters—anything could be adapted for defense purposes. What was often reinforced was how powerful anyone who still had a voice could be, even with other severe levels of impairment. One of the self-defense teachers observed,

> I find that almost the most useful exercise, even if a person is almost completely paralyzed, if they have a voice, they can still protect themselves. If they know that it's wrong, they can say so, and they can go and tell somebody later. (Instructor)

One course specifically for rural women was included in the evaluation. A representative from this group described why she had pushed for self-defense courses for this group of women. She spoke of how difficult it often was for rural women to connect with other women, and how living on their workplace, the farm, could compound the isolation:

> When I looked at it initially, I think there was a number of things. One was about self-safety and about living in isolation, about potentially protecting yourself, just because of that isolation. And at the same time, it wasn't just that self-defense, it was also you know all about the whole domestic violence thing as well. (Stakeholder)

Interviews with the self-defense teachers presenting the Isolation to Empowerment courses showed that they were very aware of the particular needs of different groups of women. For example, one spoke of how sensitive and aware the instructors had to be with migrant/refugee women and the activities they engaged in, given that many may have already experienced horrific levels of abuse:

> You have to be careful with that and make sure you're not jumping in with a "Defend yourself if this ever happens" and you suddenly realize, oh my God, it's already happened many times over. (Instructor)

Other teachers referred to the silencing that still often exists around physical and sexual violence in particular ethnic communities, and how she believed her being from a similar cultural background as the participants was often helpful. Some of the Māori WSDN-WT teachers felt that their being Māori often enabled Māori participants to disclose more of their own previous victimization:

> When you have a Māori woman teaching, the Māori women in the group can relax and open up more honestly, sometimes in unexpected detail. It's like, "Oh yeah, well I got the bash here," and, "I got this and this happened," and bang-bang-bang. (Instructor)

Parallels emerge with observations made elsewhere regarding the ways in which culture and cultural history can affect how self-defense is experienced and learned, while there is a universality to the experience of empowerment (Speidel, 2014). In writing about Native American and Chicana women, McCaughey (1998) observed,

> While the challenges of self- defense for women differentially positioned within a racist social structure vary, self-defense that teaches both physical skills and a confident, entitled attitude clearly benefits all of these women. (p. 296)

We also heard various accounts where older women with concerns about their levels of physical ability felt empowered by what they heard and did on WSDN-WT courses. For example, in one focus group of women course participants, those present recalled with glee a story recounted later by one of the other attendees:

> It was a lovely story of the little old lady with her trolley walking through and there's three big blokes been intimidating her and she kept trot, trot, trotting out and yelled, "Get the fuck out of the way." And they got such a fright that this little old lady went and challenged them because it's just intimidation. They're not really going to do anything and they backed off and said, "Oh, oh." And off she went. (Participant)

Discussion

The overwhelming impression we received from everyone we spoke with was how well designed and delivered the WSDN-WT courses were for the

participants. Wherever we went, we were told what a positive and empowering experience it was, having profound impacts especially on women who until now had been either living with violence or in fear of violence. This suggests that the value of such courses far exceeds the learning of specific self-defense moves and techniques. While these courses were rated extremely positively for how such skills were taught and transmitted, the successful acquisition of these rested on a platform of inner strength and belief in their right to be safe. This demonstrates the intrinsic limitations of martial arts courses and other self-defense programs taught without a clear empowerment focus.

So what does an empowerment focus really mean? And why is it essential? From all we heard and observed, several core features emerged. These included the following:

- a gendered analysis of violence against women that extends beyond individual explanations to the identification of structural aspects;
- encouraging self-reflection regarding the messages women learned from childhood regarding appropriate femininity;
- understanding gendered socialization and sex role stereotypes;
- belief in mutual respect and equal rights within relationships;
- having the confidence of voice to say “no” to unwanted touching and behaviors, and the confidence of body to reinforce this physically if necessary;
- knowing one’s own worth and value and choosing to act in its best interests;
- feeling able to intervene and/or seek help to protect others at risk.

The program we evaluated selected and trained teachers committed to enabling participants to embrace such a stance. The strength and power of these self-defense teachers served as valuable instruction in itself, reinforcing the importance of courses being taught by women and for women (Brecklin, 2008). Findings from international research studies indicate that the most effective self-defense training is presented as a package of related mental concepts and physical techniques (Hollander, 2014; Senn et al., 2015). Only teaching kicks and punches is insufficient, likewise only telling participants they have the right to be treated with respect. It is the combination of practical skills taught by specially trained self-defense teachers, accompanied by strong messages aimed at increasing self-esteem and confidence, that together increase course effectiveness. Obtaining an experiential sense of their empowered self enables women to face potentially dangerous situations with a greater range of options available and the resolve to keep trying and never give up.

Limitations

The data presented here included a mix of pre–post evaluation forms supplemented by interview material obtained from course participants, community stakeholders, and self-defense instructors. Given the nature of the courses offered during the study's time period, approximately half of the pre–post forms were completed by representatives of only one of the targeted groups—migrant and refugee women. Further research would benefit from obtaining the views of increased numbers of women from the other targeted groups. It would also be advantageous for any subsequent study to be able to conduct greater numbers of in-depth interviews and to ensure adequate representation across all sectors.

Additional insights might be obtained by interviewing community stakeholders before and after the women undertook the program, with follow-up interviews conducted 1 year postcourse. Enhanced measures of this kind would produce a more robust data set that could be considered in tandem with the findings from this initial examination of program impacts.

Implications and Conclusion

There are important implications from the results of this evaluation undertaken with groups of women deemed at elevated risk of violence. Most notably, the findings demonstrate how empowering these courses were for women with their own histories of intimate partner victimization. For this group of women, they also strongly endorse the benefits of providing such courses through a collaborative partnership with women's refuges.

They also reinforce findings from elsewhere, suggesting that martial arts courses will have limited impact compared with courses where physical self-defense skills are taught within the context of a feminist empowerment model (De Welde, 2003; Hollander, 2014; Thompson, 2014). A key strand of this model involves challenging dominant gendered scripts that portray women as inevitably vulnerable in the face of men's invincibility (Jones & Mattingly, 2016; McCaughey, 1997). As Burton (1998) has observed,

> The construction of women's physical weakness as the primary reason for their inability to resist is a false one. There is no sex-based deficiency that makes women unable to harm their aggressors. Rather . . . women are trained not only to disbelieve their strength, but to shy away from physical violence. (p. 192)

The opportunity for embodied learning provided the women on these courses with what was often their first lifetime experience feeling the power and strength of their bodies, an experience many deemed transformative.

Linked to this was the sense of strength they received from learning how to use their voice effectively. This translated not only into being able to yell loudly to attract attention or exert authority but also acquiring a stronger sense of where and how to seek help, as well as offer help to others. This links in well with the recent emphasis being given to bystander intervention education as part of a rape prevention program (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Carmody & Ovenden, 2013).

Being able to work effectively and safely with women perceived as being at risk of violence necessitates carefully selected, trained, and supervised instructors. It was very evident that the WSDN-WT teachers were extremely well trained and operated within a close network characterized by ongoing mentoring and up-skilling.

The success of the program was also linked to the strength of the collaborative partnership operating between the instructors and the partner agencies, including rape crisis and migrant and refugee groups. The self-defense teachers were dependent on these agencies not only for referrals but also to provide support for course participants during and after the course, if required. This ensured that, for example, any woman who may have been triggered by an aspect of the course could address this with an already familiar support worker. In turn, the support workers often appreciated the ways in which the self-defense course opened up “their” women and enabled fuller realization of their potential.

Learning the physical skills and moves on their own is insufficient to change women’s attitudes toward themselves and their bodies, and these must be taught within a broader context that recognizes the connections between violence against women and the legacy of patriarchy. There is no suggestion that self-defense programs on their own are a sufficient tool in antirape campaigns—Instead, they should form one element of a combined, coordinated effort aimed at reducing violence against women. While it is essential to have prevention programs targeted at men as the most prevalent abusers (Flood, 2011), it is irresponsible to leave women and girls unprepared for how to respond to attacks in what we hope is the interim before achieving a gender-equal, violence-free society. The success of the courses described here demonstrates that isolation and vulnerability are not the inevitable precursors of victimization, and that victimhood can be resisted and replaced by empowerment.

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Author Biographies

Jan Jordan is an associate professor at the Institute of Criminology, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She has more than 20 years experience teaching and researching in the area of women, crime, and victimization. Her major research interest is in sexual violence, and she is a regular presenter on police adult sexual assault investigation training courses. She is currently working on a major research grant awarded by the Marsden Fund of the Royal Society of New Zealand to explore why it remains difficult to achieve substantive change in how women as victims of rape are responded to and treated.

Elaine Mossman currently works as a private research and evaluation consultant in Wellington, New Zealand. She has previously held several university positions and remains an adjunct research fellow to the Victoria University's Institute of Criminology. She has conducted research across a wide range of disciplines but has developed particular expertise in the area of applied criminal justice (e.g., family violence, sexual violence, victims of crime, young and adult offenders).