

“Get Out of My Home and Don’t Come Back!” Empowering Women Through Self-Defense

Violence Against Women

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Abstract

Can self-defense courses empower those already victimized? This article explores the potential for self-defense courses to have specific efficacy in the prevention of intimate partner violence (IPV). It draws on interview ($n = 36$) and pre- and postevaluation ($n = 44$) data from two studies: (a) evaluation of a pilot study of a feminist empowerment self-defense course designed specifically for women’s refuge/shelter clients (Violence Prevention Project [VPP]) and (b) evaluation of women’s self-defense courses collected as part of a larger evaluation study (Skills for Safety). The overwhelmingly positive findings from both studies suggest greater consideration be offered to providing further collaborative refuge/self-defense courses for women victimized by IPV.

Keywords

intimate partner violence, prevention, self-defense, empowerment

Introduction

To defend or not to defend? The dilemma of determining whether women’s self-defense should be advocated or not as an effective tool to combat violence continues to be debated (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Ullman, 1998). The conundrum is a real one, given that men’s violence against women shows few signs of abating, despite decades of activism and intervention programs across the world. A recent analysis using data from 81 countries to

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estimate the global prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women showed that 30% of women aged 15 years and above in 2010 had experienced physical and/or sexual IPV during their lifetime (Devries et al., 2013). This is reflected in New Zealand statistics, where 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, 2004). The risk was somewhat higher for women living in rural areas (39%), compared with 33% of women living in an urban area. The overwhelming majority of women globally do not report such incidents to the police (Brown, 2011; Daly & Bouhours, 2010), with sexual violence recognized as the most under-reported of all crimes (Kelly, 2002). The most common reason given for not reporting such violence or approaching formal services for help is that it is perceived as “normal” or “not serious” (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010)—it is “just what happens.”

Continuing high rates of IPV suggest that despite feminist activism securing significant legislative and policy reforms, there is evidence of both change and no change, and progress and no progress (Mooney, 2007; Stanko, 2007; Walklate, 2012). While women’s refuges/shelters and phone helplines are now more widely available, such services cater primarily to those already victimized by physical forms of IPV. Primary prevention has proven to be a more difficult undertaking, with many programs emphasizing what potential victims can do to avoid victimization. Despite a growing emphasis on the importance of prevention, the measures advocated often reflect gendered thinking that reinforces perceptions of women’s vulnerability and men’s invincibility instead of challenging these constructions (De Welde, 2003; Hollander, 2016; McCaughey, 1997).

An alternative prevention focus currently receiving increased research attention is self-defense programs, particularly those reflecting a feminist empowerment focus (Cermele, 2010; Hollander, 2014; Jordan & Mossman, 2017; Senn et al., 2015; Thompson, 2014). The majority of the evaluations conducted to date have explored their value for North American college students, in part because the requirement that universities demonstrate their commitment to sexual assault prevention has resulted in some introducing self-defense programs. The word “some” is critical here, given recent observations that most college campuses continue to exclude self-defense from their prevention efforts (McCaughy & Cermele, 2017). This is despite the fact that evaluations of these courses have been almost universally positive and provide clear evidence that active resistance is an effective means of protection and prevention (for example, see Hollander, 2014; Orchowski, Gidycz, & Raffle, 2008; Senn et al., 2015). In a review of 20 quantitative studies that aimed to assess the effects of self-defense training on women participants, Brecklin (2008) found many of the studies showed improvements in all eight of the variables assessed: psychological/attitudinal (assertiveness, self-esteem, anxiety, perceived control, fear of sexual assault, and self-efficacy) and behavioral outcomes (physical competence and avoidance behaviors). Despite such positive evaluations, the potential of self-defense training for other groups of women remains relatively untapped. Nowhere is this more evident than in

contexts involving partner violence, with self-defense courses often dismissed as irrelevant and criticized for being primarily oriented to stranger attack scenarios (see Hollander, 2016). Such dismissals ignore the potential benefits these courses could provide to women victimized in IPV contexts.

One arena where self-defense *has* been discussed in relation to IPV has involved assessing whether “battered women” can be recognized as legitimately using self-defense against violent partners, most controversially in the rare but extreme cases when this results in the death of that partner (Stubbs & Tolmie, 2008; Wells, 2012). More recently, concern has been voiced that evidence of women responding to violence self-defensively has been used as justification for their arrest under the umbrella of mandatory arrest policies (Kernsmith, 2005; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Worcester, 2002). This can be viewed as a blatant example of “gender injustice” (Renzetti, 1999) and ignores the considerable body of research evidence demonstrating that women’s motivation for the use of violence arises primarily from the need to physically protect themselves and/or their children (Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Kernsmith, 2005), in contrast to men’s predominance for using violence to maintain control over their partner (Johnson, 2005). Gender *does* make a difference.

A second arena is evident within evaluations of self-defense programs that suggest prior victimization experiences will be a significant motivating factor for women to enroll in such courses, although this has been argued more typically within the context of sexual assault (Brecklin, 2008; Brecklin & Ullman, 2005). The fact that significant numbers of women taking self-defense courses reported that prior victimization was interpreted as signifying their personal experiences led to their course participation. While acknowledging such a correlation, Hollander (2010) undertook data analysis aimed specifically at exploring this connection further and compared the rates of sexual assault reported by students who enrolled in a university self-defense class with women enrolled in other classes. She found that while the rates of reported sexual assault were higher for the self-defense sample, these differences were not statistically significant. Moreover, the majority of the women signing up for self-defense specified reasons other than their own assault experiences for enrolling, such as word-of-mouth recommendations and the desire to be generally more confident and assertive. She also noted that many women taking the courses reported no previous sexual assault experiences or unwanted sexual contact. Hollander (2010) concluded, “Although it may seem intuitive that women take self-defense because of a prior assault, this commonplace assertion is not supported by these data” (p. 464).

Women who have experienced IPV will have experienced significant prior victimization, with abundant research demonstrating their increased risks of further victimization (Cochran, Sellers, Wiesbrock, & Palacios, 2011; Mele, 2009). However, they may also be one of the most difficult groups to access for self-defense training. Research on IPV has repeatedly demonstrated the ways in which such experiences can erode women’s sense of agency and selfhood (Kearney, 2001; Stein, 2012), and these impacts, combined with the isolating and controlling behaviors of the perpetrators, may serve as barriers to their participation.

Other barriers limiting course uptake have been evident in resistance to the very notion of teaching women self-defense. Just as first-wave feminists faced opposition when advocating that both self-defense and campaigns for women's suffrage were potentially equalizing mechanisms (Looser, 2010; Rouse & Slutsky, 2014), second-wave feminists also encountered resistance when embracing self-defense as one way to stop rape and end men's power and dominance over women (Dann, 1985; Searles & Berger, 1987).

There were also some feminists voicing concerns that such courses were victim-blaming and gave women the message that they were responsible for rape (Basile, 2015; Lonsway, 1996; Swift, 1985). The potential empowerment that could come from self-defense courses was diluted, even negated, by criticisms that such courses promoted the use of violence and could put women at risk of serious injury or death (Marchbanks, Lui, & Mercy, 1990; Stanko, 1996; Wong & Balemba, 2016). Thus, the links between self-defense and empowerment recognized by many suffragettes became eclipsed by contemporary debates such as those questioning whether or not women should be encouraged to resist rape (Reekie & Wilson, 1993; Ullman, 1998).

This article explores the potential for feminist empowerment-oriented self-defense courses to have specific efficacy in the prevention of IPV. It differs in two key respects from most previous self-defense program evaluations: first in its focus on IPV instead of rape/sexual assault, and second, through its examination of a pilot study of a feminist empowerment self-defense course designed specifically for women's refuge clients (VPP; Mossman & Jordan, 2013). This is supplemented with data collected from a more recent study of women's self-defense courses (that included refuge clients and other women deemed at risk of violent victimization because of isolation) collected as part of a larger evaluation study (Skills for Safety; Jordan & Mossman, 2016). These latter courses are referred to as the Isolation to Empowerment Courses.

Method

This analysis presents data collected from women who had previous experiences of partner victimization and who participated in feminist empowerment self-defense courses provided by the Women's Self Defense Network—Wāhine Toa (WSDN-WT). WSDN-WT has been the single national network providing self-defense classes in New Zealand for more than 28 years; their underpinning philosophy is that all women and girls have the right to live in safety from abuse and violence, and the focus of their work is to equip women and girls with options, strategies, and skills to stay safe from violence and abuse.

Details of the two evaluation studies are presented in the following, together with background information on the respective self-defense courses. Table 1 summarizes data collected from each study, on which we have drawn for this article.

VPP

The VPP was a 2013 initiative developed and run by WSDN-WT in collaboration with the National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges (NCIWR). NCIWR is the

Table 1. Details of Two Research Projects.

	Research study	
	1. Violence Prevention Project—evaluation of pilot	2. Isolation to Empowerment Courses—skills for safety evaluation ^a
Number of courses evaluated	4	9
Number of pre- and postevaluations completed	44	115
Interviews		
• refuge/support workers	4	8 ^b
• Participants (refuge clients)	—	6 ^c
• Participants (other women)	—	9
• WSDN instructors	3	6

Note. WSDN = Women's Self Defense Network.

^aThese courses are for women deemed at particular risk of violent victimization because of isolation, including women isolated as a result of previous victimization.

^bThis included one focus group with four women.

^cThis also included one focus group with four women.

umbrella organization for about 50 independent women's refuges across New Zealand, providing specialist 24-hr support, advocacy, and accommodation for women and their children who are experiencing family violence. Combining the expertise of WSDN-WT and NCIWR enabled the development and delivery of a new self-defense program that targeted young women who were at high risk of being re-victimized. These young women were a potentially hard-to-reach group, but identified as one of those most in need of violence prevention interventions. The piloting and evaluation of this new program was made possible through a grant provided by the Vodafone Foundation's Capacity Development funding.

All WSDN-WT women courses (VPP and Isolation to Empowerment Courses) are typically initiated by the refuge or partner organization, who approach WSDN-WT to run the course. It is their responsibility to organize the group of participants. One of WSDN-WT's requirements is that women participate by choice, that is, participation must be voluntary. In line with these standard WSDN-WT processes, for the evaluation of the VPP pilot, the refuges were responsible for recruiting course participants and for each course were asked to invite 10-15 clients (no information was collected on how many women who were approached declined the opportunity to participate).

Each course was 8 hr long and ran over 2 days. The overall aims of the VPP were as follows:

- to empower the young women involved;
- to build the capacity of WSDN-WT to work effectively with these high-needs young women; and
- to further strengthen the collaborative links between WSDN-WT and Women's Refuge (at national and local levels).

The VPP involved WSDN-WT self-defense teachers working with young women who were recipients of services from Women's Refuges, teaching them skills and strategies for keeping safe from violence and abuse. While all these young women had experienced IPV that resulted in their affiliation with Women's Refuge, this varied in terms of the different forms of violence experienced. Hence, the program was developed and adapted to include how to deal with verbal and/or emotional abuse as well as teaching a range of physical self-defense strategies based on the women's own previous experiences (e.g., of choking or strangle holds).

A mixed-method evaluation framework was developed that used both quantitative and qualitative methods to capture perspectives from three key groups: course participants, refuge workers, and self-defense instructors (Mossman & Jordan, 2013). A total of 54 women recruited by local refuges attended one of the four pilot courses offered, of whom 44 (81%) completed pre- and postcourse evaluations.

Details of the methods for the three groups of research participants are as follows:

- Program participants completed pre- and postevaluation forms to assess outcomes from the program. These consisted of a one-page evaluation form completed by course participants at the beginning and at the end of the course. The self-defense instructor described the purpose of the evaluation to participants and assured that they were aware that participation was voluntary (no participants declined to participate). The evaluation forms were then distributed to the women by the self-defense teacher, who explained the rating scale and then provided time for the women to complete the evaluation forms individually. The course was run over 2 days, and the first evaluation was completed at the beginning of Day 1 and the second at the close of the program on Day 2.

The form included eight self-efficacy statements related to course objectives (i.e., confidence in their ability to perform a range of self-defense techniques) and two items related to intention to act (i.e., likelihood of engaging in help-seeking behaviors). Each item was presented as a 10-point Likert-type scale. A paired-sample *t* test was used to assess changes in participants' pre- and postratings. The 10 items assessed the impact of the course on the objectives listed as follows:

- i. Stop an attack
- ii. Use physical strategies to stay safe
- iii. Use voice to stay safe
- iv. Make good choices to stay safe
- v. Recognize risk
- vi. Understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships
- vii. Be in control of what happens to your body
- viii. Support others experiencing violence/abuse
- ix. Likelihood of telling someone
- x. Likelihood of seeking help/support to stay safe.

Participants also had the opportunity to write in their own words what they felt the most useful thing was that they had learned from the course.

- *Refuge workers* participate fully in the self-defense courses alongside their clients (typically two to three workers per course). Their participation enables them to provide specialist support to women if required, during and after the course. Within 6 months of completing the VPP course, four refugee workers (one from each course) were interviewed to seek their observations of the impact of the course on the participants. They were also asked whether their collaboration running the course had altered their perceptions of WSDN-WT and the value of self-defense work. The following questions were used to guide these interviews:
 - How would you describe the impact of the program overall?
 - What have you observed as the results of the course for the women who participated?
 - Has participation in this course impacted how you see refugee's relationship with WSDN-WT?
 - Has it had any effect on how you view the value of self-defense overall?
- *WSDN-WT instructors* ($n = 3$) were asked to provide written comments on whether they felt their capacity to teach self-defense to this high-risk group had been enhanced, along with general views on the course and its outcomes. Instructors were invited to respond to the following questions:
 - Do you have any comments in relation to your ability to teach a "high-needs" group?
 - How has your capacity/confidence in working with this sort of group changed?
 - Did you learn anything in particular from instructing these courses?
 - How have your links with refugee changed?
 - What did you see as being the main value of these courses?

Qualitative data provided by participants and interview data obtained from refugee workers and WSDN-WT instructors were broken into distinct units of meaning and labeled to generate key concepts that were then clustered into descriptive categories (Charmaz, 1983). This material was then analyzed for emerging themes assisted by NVivo software.

Isolation to Empowerment Courses

In 2012, WSDN-WT was contracted by the Ministry of Justice to provide Isolation to Empowerment Courses for women deemed at particular risk of violent victimization because of isolation. This included women who lived in rural areas (especially, Māori women in rural communities), were migrants or refugees, had physical or cognitive impairment, or were isolated as a result of previous IPV. The last category was included

because of the high risks of repeat victimization experienced by women living with violence, and it is specifically the qualitative data obtained from this latter group of women that are presented here. These courses are always run in collaboration with partner agencies, including Women's Refuges, and taught over 6-8 hr, with program content tailored to suit the specific needs, strengths, and abilities of the participants.

The Violence Prevention Program was based on the Isolation to Empowerment Courses, and hence, the two sets of courses shared the same core aims and content. While the course content remains consistent, each course is tailored to the needs of the women participating in it, including flexibility to respond to any particular issues or concerns that the women might raise (e.g., strangulation is a common concern in courses run with refuges). All courses evaluated were run by instructors who had received the same training, had similar class sizes, and were a similar length (6-8 hr usually over 2 days).

The evaluation framework for the Isolation to Empowerment Courses was developed by the researchers working in collaboration with a WSDN-WT research team and incorporated a mixed-method research design (Jordan & Mossman, 2016).

Pre- and postquantitative data using a similar methodology to the VPP pilot were collected for 115 women course participants in the first half of 2015. Positive and significant results were found (see Jordan & Mossman, 2016). Quantitative results from this study are not presented in this article as, while the courses included women who were living with violence, there was no specific course targeting refuge clients during the evaluation period.

Qualitative material was obtained from a focus group ($n = 4$) and individual interviews ($n = 2$) conducted with course participants who had previously participated on a course that had targeted women who were isolated due to IPV. Also included in this article is material from an additional nine interviews that were conducted with participants of non-refuge Isolation to Empowerment Courses, where views and experiences were similar and relevant to those of the refuge clients. All interviews were conducted in the second half of 2015 on women who had participated in a course within 12 months. Women focus group participants and interviewees were approached in the first instance by the partner agency that collaborated in the delivery of the WSDN-WT course (i.e., Refuge/Specialist Sexual Assault support agency). They were provided with information on the research and asked for their permission for a researcher to contact them. All those approached by the researchers agreed to participate. Written informed consent was collected from all those interviewed.

Interviews with women participants were complemented by individual interviews ($n = 4$) and a focus group ($n = 4$) with key stakeholders and individual interviews with self-defense instructors ($n = 6$). Stakeholders from partner organizations were asked for their evaluation of how well they considered the course met their clients' needs in relation to the following outcomes:

- women learned useful strategies to stay safe;
- the course was a positive experience for the women;
- women's self-confidence increased; and
- the course was relevant to the women's needs.

The interviews with key stakeholders in the same case study areas provided an important community-based perspective on the value and impacts of these courses (e.g., women's refuge, migrant support, rural women, rape crisis, court workers, and other community stakeholders). Around half of these stakeholders had themselves participated in the WSDN-WT courses held in their area so could reflect on their own experiences of being a participant as well as their knowledge and observations of how the course impacted women from their agencies.

The interviews with self-defense teachers in the case study areas provided additional useful information regarding program content and delivery, selection and training of teachers, and the aims and philosophy informing the organization and its operation. Each of the six teachers was interviewed separately, and an additional interview was conducted with the Chairperson of WSDN-WT to obtain her perspective as well as additional background detail on these courses.

Both quantitative and qualitative findings from the VPP are presented below, supplemented with relevant qualitative material from the Isolation to Empowerment Courses. The combined data set provides useful insights regarding the potential benefits and any limitations arising from offering empowerment-focused self-defense courses to women with previous IPV victimization histories, particularly when presented collaboratively with partner agencies.

Findings

Outcomes for Course Participants

A core aim of the VPP was to empower the young women involved as participants and teach them skills and strategies to keep safe from violence and abuse. As noted earlier, this was primarily evaluated by looking at changes in 44 participants' self-defense-related self-efficacy ratings from the beginning to the end of the course, along with two statements on their likelihood of seeking help/support to stay safe (i.e., intention to act). Their group means for pre- and post-self-efficacy in relation to 10 of the program's key objectives are presented in Figure 1.

What can be clearly seen from this graph is that, as a group, participants' self-efficacy and/or likelihood of completing each of the 10 program objectives increased following the program. Paired-sample *t* tests found all 10 self-rated improvements were statistically significant ($p < .001$; see Table 2).

The areas of self-identified greatest need (including confidence in their ability to stop an attack and make good choices to stay safe) were those areas where the greatest gains were made. It should be noted that prior to the current program, most or all of the course participants would have already attended a Women's Living Without Violence program through Refuge (designed to provide support and information for women experiencing IPV). This could account for the relatively higher preprogram ratings in relation to their awareness of more general violence prevention strategies. The VPP not only resulted in further improvements in these items but also assessed their knowledge of physical violence prevention strategies.

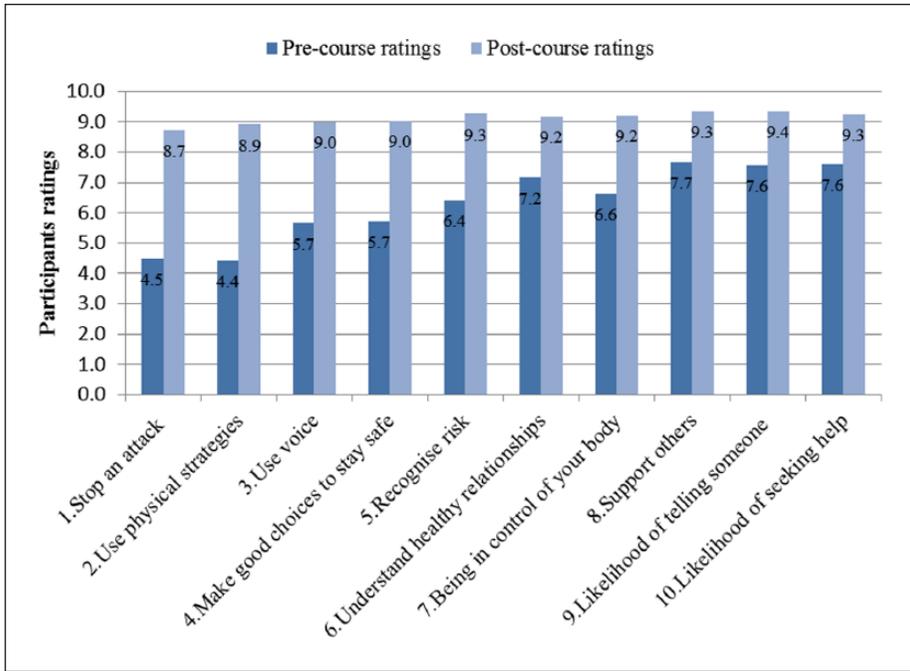


Figure 1. Changes in self-efficacy ratings following participation.

The qualitative data obtained from participants in both the VPP and the Isolation to Empowerment Courses reflected very similar themes that are consequently presented together here.

Increased capacity to stop an attack. Many of the women indicated in precourse measures that faced with a threatening partner, they had previously felt unable to stop an attack. Gaining the knowledge and confidence to keep themselves safe emerged, as Figure 1 illustrates, as the area of biggest gain for the women. As one participant described it, the most important learning she gained from the course was

That I have the ability to keep myself safe. I have the power!

Identified by many of the women was the importance of learning how not to be controlled by their fear, with several saying they needed to learn to block their fear to be free to respond:

It doesn't matter what their size is, you can still defend yourself and that when you're getting attacked you have to block out your fear and just go hard.

Another participant said that

Table 2. Pre- and Postprogram Changes for VPP Participants.

Course objective	Preprogram M (SD)	Postprogram M (SD)	t	df	p
1. Stop an attack	4.5 (2.2)	8.7 (1.5)	14.0	43	.000
2. Use physical strategies to stay safe	4.4 (2.3)	8.9 (1.4)	14.8	43	.000
3. Use voice to stay safe	5.7 (2.9)	9.0 (1.7)	8.7	43	.000
4. Make good choices to stay safe	5.7 (2.4)	9.0 (1.5)	10.3	41	.000
5. Recognize risk	6.4 (2.1)	9.3 (1.1)	8.8	41	.000
6. Understand healthy relationships	7.2 (2.4)	9.2 (1.4)	6.3	42	.000
7. Being in control of your body	6.6 (2.9)	9.2 (1.6)	6.8	42	.000
8. Support others	7.7 (2.7)	9.3 (1.3)	5.3	43	.000
9. Likelihood of telling someone	7.6 (2.7)	9.4 (1.4)	5.5	43	.000
10. Likelihood of seeking help/support	7.6 (2.8)	9.3 (1.6)	5.1	43	.000

Note. Levene's test for equality of variances was not statistically significant, so a *T* score for "equal variances" was used. VPP = Violence Prevention Project.

This knowledge and this course has helped to dissipate the fear that if I was attacked I wouldn't know what to do. Thank you so much!

Comments made by the women reflected strong themes suggesting that this course increased their confidence and sense of their own power, providing them with tools to use to protect themselves. It is important to remember that the women on these particular courses had all experienced significant levels of fear, harm, and victimization, and many indicated in precourse measures that they had felt unable to stop an attack.

Increased confidence. What many of the women alluded to was the growth in confidence and self-esteem that they gained, and this was reinforced by the stakeholders interviewed. The four refuge workers interviewed all commented strongly that they saw indicators of greatly increased confidence and empowerment in the women attending the course. They described how these women typically lacked a sense of power and control in their lives, coming from a place characterized by previously high levels of victimization. When asked about the perceived impact of the course on their clients, one refuge worker observed,

... a huge growth in their [the participants] confidence and self-esteem. A lot were scared and lived in fear and couldn't believe what they did on the course!

Other workers noted also how the increased confidence gave the women strength and courage, helping them learn:

... that they have the right to say "no" and that they actually were given the skill to be able to back up their "no."

The example was given of a mother and daughter who both took the course and how the daughter came to see her mother in a new light as a result of this experience. The daughter was used to seeing her mother in a victimized state, developing addiction issues as a means of coping. Doing the course together enabled this young woman to see a new confidence in her mother and a greatly increased sense of self-esteem. The refuge worker commented that seeing the growth in her mother's confidence prompted her to say

Mum, you should hang around with women like this all the time!

The benefits of having multi-generational participation were also described as evident in a situation where the daughter, mother, and grandmother attended together, each wanting to reclaim some of the confidence lost through their own IPV experiences.

Increased use of voice. A third key theme emerging from the interviews involved perceptible changes in the participants' willingness to recognize and practice the power of their own voices. For example, when asked to yell, the women, at the beginning of the course, could make very little sound or noise; they were used to staying silent. What several refuge workers observed was that

By the end of it, they had a voice. They learned it was OK to yell and scream to get help or to scare off the attacker.

Women participants in the Isolation to Empowerment Courses emphasized 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.

All of the participants and support workers referred to an increased confidence to use the voice to be assertive and/or to seek help. Some women expressed initial anxiety about being loud and letting themselves shout out. One said,

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!

A similar comment was made by another course participant:

The most empowering thing that she [the instructor] 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.

One refuge worker, when asked to identify 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 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.

Another refuge worker referred to the changes obvious in a woman who had been living in a violent relationship for 13 years, saying how amazing it was to see her gaining strength and yelling, "Back off!" Before doing the course, the woman lived in extreme fear and would never have felt able to tell men to back off; now, she was able to even joke about it, saying, "Any one comes for me, I'll kick him in the nuts!" While all the women laughed about this, it was nevertheless clear that their underlying attitude had changed and they no longer felt as scared and vulnerable.

The potential of the course was powerfully illustrated for us when interviewing a refuge client who, now in her 50s, had experienced abuse and violence all her life. She described how the course transformed her, attributing much of the impact to the encouragement and strong role modeling of the self-defense teacher. In a letter she wrote to this teacher later, she described how after the course she had finally felt she had a right to say how she should be treated in her own home and relationships. With her permission, we reprinted this letter as the preface to the Skills for Safety—Evaluation Report (Jordan & Mossman, 2016), considering her story an inspiring testimony to the transformative power of such courses. She describes how a man visiting her was "nutting off at me in my own home" when she felt "an angel on my shoulder," her self-defense teacher, and felt a sense of her own power:

I walked back into my lounge and jumped into the kick arse position. I stood the way you showed us. I had my hand in a fist position, and as I gently bounced up and down with my knees, I yelled at him:

I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS. GET OUT OF MY HOME AND DON'T COME BACK.

Well, believe it or not he just sat there, and I thought, oh shit, but I stood my ground and moved a bit closer with such an angry face and repeated what I had said before:

GET OUT OF MY HOME AND DON'T COME BACK.

He left this time.

Hers is a graphic example of how empowerment incorporated the building of her self-esteem in tandem with her acquisition of physical skills. Such embodied empowerment

provided the women with clear knowledge of their own physical strengths in relation to their partner's weaknesses. This enabled them to reframe prior attackers in terms of their vulnerability rather than their strength and dominance and to reframe themselves on the basis of their strengths.

Awareness raising and empowerment. A repeated refrain from participants and workers alike praised the awareness-raising components of the courses and the resulting sense of empowerment gained from this shift in perspective. One of the most challenging messages for many of these women involved the realization that the problem did not stem from them and that it was neither normal nor their fault. A focus group of support workers reiterated the messages many of the women who were their clients had been given by their abusers:

Don't make such a big deal of it.

It's just your imagination.

Nobody else would have you.

You're crazy, you're a mental bitch.

Just shut the f—up.

Hearing that they were not to blame was radical news for many, with one participant who had endured a lifetime of serious abuse saying

When I went to the course I was absolutely gobsmacked. I was so taken back. Emotionally and physically, it hit me like a tonne of bricks. Because I had never ever known anything like it, and if I had known how to do all that prior to my childhood, my childhood would have been a better life as well.

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!

Others spoke of how liberating and healing it was 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 know who have been abused in many ways, 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.

Refuge workers we interviewed, who had seen participants months after the course, commented that these changes seemed to be lasting. One said, “They're all doing really well and that [the self-defense course] has to be part of it.” Some linked the lasting nature of the benefits to the close connections that developed between the women and the strength they gained from each other. One worker described, for example, how the women often use each other in their safety plans—for example, if there is an escalating situation of violence for a woman and things are getting out of hand, she will text one of the other women who might take her away, at least for a break.

Another refuge worker spoke of how privileged she and the other workers felt being able to witness the transformations in participants' lives. The changes were evident in the women's use of voice and posture, and how they held themselves in their bodies. As she summarized it: “They were different when they left from how they arrived.”

Outcomes for Self-Defense Instructors and Women's Refuge Workers

The second objective of the VPP was to build the capacity of WSDN-WT to work effectively with these high-needs young women. The collaboration between WSDN-WT and Women's Refuge was experienced positively by the three instructors involved and seen as a relationship worth developing further despite the additional demands and need for flexibility required to run such courses. Working with women who had all experienced trauma and violence required instructors being carefully tuned in to the women's needs and flexible to pace and monitor course participation. The observation was made that:

Issues come up all the time which may mean a change in direction or slowing down completely so everyone has time to express themselves, take a breath and recover before moving on.

Remaining responsive to course participants' needs was important:

There was the need to spend time hearing their stories and to hear (and respond) to their fears around techniques not working i.e. when he is a “P” (methamphetamine) user. As well, how to deal with him continuing to turn up at home as if he belonged there—all very real fears for very real situations.

It was also important to validate for the women:

. . . how hard it is to stand up to someone who fills you with fear. . . [and the] value in being relentless, both in their physical defense and in the ongoing fight for freedom after separation.

The instructors said they felt privileged to hear the stories of horrific abuse experienced by many of the women, including the younger ones on the course.

The third objective of the VPP was to strengthen the collaborative links between WSDN-WT and Women's Refuge. Both self-defense instructors and Refuge workers alike commented on the positive nature of undertaking this collaborative exercise together. The experience enhanced the awareness and understanding each had of the other's role and highlighted the benefits arising from being able to work together. The Refuge workers felt they gained a new appreciation of how self-defense training could benefit their client group and complement existing programs and relationships. One summarized it this way:

"Refuge usually works with people as victims and self-defense usually works with people not as victims."

Another reflected how strongly it reminded her of the need to embrace both the psychological and physical dimensions so that along with gaining information about their legal and personal rights (as provided in existing refuge courses), women had the opportunity to experience a sense of their own voice and power.

The self-defense instructors all emphasized the importance of having refuge workers participating alongside their client group on such courses. They could then provide support for the women and often knew where the areas of discomfort and sensitivity might be. It was also advantageous to the instructors to have the workers available to provide background information on the women and the kinds of violence they had encountered. This helped them to custom-make the course where appropriate and to meet the group where they were at and at their developmental level also.

Both the Refuge workers and WSDN-WT teachers involved were overwhelmingly affirming of the benefits from this pilot collaborative project. The major barrier to expanding this collaboration and facilitating more such courses is funding. The need is clear for more courses to be offered not only in these areas, where demand continues for other girls and women to have the opportunity to do the course, but also to extend this opportunity to other districts. There would also ideally be additional funding made available for top-up courses for those who have already completed the basic course to ensure the consolidation of initial learning.

Potential Challenges

As researchers we were surprisingly unable to obtain any criticisms or complaints about the courses and their delivery. Three potential areas of controversy, however, are briefly addressed here in response to commonly voiced challenges to teaching self-defense.

Is it victim blaming? One significant area of potential concern was whether or not women on these courses might have felt criticized or blamed for how they had previously responded to their violent partners. Participants and refuge workers from both studies were typically insistent about experiencing the course only in empowering ways and with no hint of victim blaming. This finding reinforced what the self-defense teachers told us about the ways they consciously strove to validate the many different ways women responded to prior victimization. A pragmatic approach to ensuring women's safety meant that while emphatically affirming violence against women is not their fault, they considered it essential to equip women with skills they could use in their own, and others,' protection. As one Refuge worker expressed it:

In an ideal world women wouldn't have to worry about keeping themselves safe or be learning things like self-defense. However, we don't live in an ideal world, and part of my job is to support women to keep themselves as safe as possible and I think a self-defense course is a way of doing that.

Is it risk-taking? A second concern questions the wisdom of encouraging women whose partners are known to be violent standing up to them or fighting back because of risks to their own safety. The feedback we received indicated that an important aspect of the courses involved time spent talking about ways to minimize or avoid the use of violence. The emphasis was on learning ways to manage fear and read situations so that each woman could choose the best and safest response in any given context. This was likely to differ for different women, and even for the same women at different times, being influenced by factors such as how drunk or drugged their partner might be or whether a weapon was present. The self-defense teachers talked us through the ways they worked with the women to explore different options and courses of action they could take when they felt the tension building. The emphasis on protection, not aggression, was well-recognized. A Refuge worker stated,

I would never have had the confidence to go for a man's testicles or anything like that. I just wouldn't have dreamt it. So I think it's about—you know how when men fight, they just get into a punch up? This is about disabling the attacker and then getting out.

The empowerment resulted from the women being able to canvass options for survival and safety alongside being aware of their vulnerability.

Is it triggering? Both refuge workers and the self-defense instructors themselves spoke of their awareness that the material presented could trigger reactions and traumatic memories in course participants and sought to be well equipped in each environment with what supports were available. Several of the self-defense teachers said how much they valued support workers participating in the course alongside the women. If someone was triggered, one of the workers could take them aside, while the teacher continued with the rest of the group. Triggering per se was not viewed as a negative consequence, with one teacher commenting, for example,

It is fine if there's support, we can bring them back and it can be an empowering experience to go back and say, "Okay, I've got it under control, I'm re-entering now." And then also making a decision and saying, "Okay, if this happens again I'm going out before I get to the place that I'm too triggered."

The refuge workers expressed confidence in the abilities of the WSDN-WT teachers to recognize and validate previous victimization experiences, with one worker observing in relation to the self-defense instructor:

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.

Factors recognized as contributing to the program's overall success are explored in the next section.

Identifiable Positive Features

Feedback received indicated that those involved valued the careful design of the program to ensure physical skills were taught within a broad context addressing the realities of gender-based violence and emphasizing the rights of girls and women to live in safety. In addition to observing changes in the participants, refuge workers identified what they considered to be the most positive aspects of the course. Key features specified included the following:

- *Small class sizes*—Limiting class sizes to a maximum of 25 participants enabled the self-defense teachers to ensure the women's safety and monitor how the information presented was being received. Having agency support workers present also helped to ensure the emotional safety of all participants.
- *Taught in a safe place*—The venue was very important, with the preferred location being a safe private space that was already familiar to the women.
- *Having support workers present*—Also emphasized was the desirability of having support workers who knew the women present and who could brief the instructors if necessary.
- *Having a woman as the self-defense teacher*—Workers noted that the participants often expressed surprise when a woman instructor walked in, and this fact alone was important in demonstrating that it was technique, not physical size or strength, that was important. Many of the women initially felt they were too small, weak, or afraid to be able to resist an attacker, unless armed with a weapon. A refuge worker commented,

A lot of the women who had been violent themselves and used weapons to protect themselves had their beliefs challenged, especially when the tutor showed them what a pen could do. One of the women, instead of having a baseball bat beside her bed, now has a pen there!

- This realization helps to keep the women safer also, she said, since any weapon they had could be used against them. The comment was also made that one of the last moves the women learned was how to respond if faced with a sexual attack and a lot were quite scared but

. . . they got down and did it and learned what they could do and wow, they thought, we could actually do this!

- *Having a self-defense instructor who was aware and sensitive to the needs of group members*—All comments received on this aspect indicated that the women felt such awareness was apparent in the instructors involved. For example, one noted that the instructor was very sensitive because, knowing the participants had experienced violent situations and controlling relationships, she reassured them that they did not have to do anything they did not want to:

She made it so easy that they all pretty much did everything.

- The instructors were praised for the efforts they went to in order to understand precisely what scenarios women on the course had experienced and/or were fearful of encountering. The physical move a few women found the hardest was the strangle hold (being held from the back and strangled). While the instructor assured them they did not have to do it, in the end they all did and were observed as gaining in confidence from doing so.
- Support workers attending the Isolation to Empowerment Courses also expressed confidence in the abilities of the WSDN-WT teachers to recognize and validate previous victimization experiences. One refuge worker 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.

- The course 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, able to be accessed when needed.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One limitation of this study derives from this research being conducted on exploratory courses intentionally targeting previous IPV victims. This resulted in the findings being based on relatively small numbers of course participants, support workers, and

self-defense instructors. With increased availability of such programs, greater scope will exist for accessing larger sample sizes. Second, many of the women in this study were already clients of refuges and had undertaken previous educational and awareness-raising courses. These may have helped to prepare them and increase their receptiveness to the self-defense courses. It would be useful in subsequent research to monitor over time changed attitudes and behaviors in women with previous IPV victimization undertaking a self-defense course compared with a matched control group of women taking other refuge courses, similar to the Hollander (2010) evaluation of college students.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates the potential of feminist empowerment self-defense programs to build confidence and resilience in women whose lives previously have been circumscribed with fear and violence. The women undertaking these courses reported increased confidence in their abilities to use their voices and bodies to keep themselves safe, as well as overall increase in confidence and empowerment. The unanticipated experience of having multiple generations of women from the same family participating highlighted the importance of the intergenerational transmission of values and attitudes. Some of the examples given showed that attending this course with their mothers helped young women to view them in a new light, while both gained greater confidence to defend themselves. This indicates the clear potential for WSDN-WT courses to impact positively on how these young women will mother their own children and suggests that the vulnerability of young children of mothers whose safety is at risk may be reduced if their mothers are empowered with self-defense knowledge and increased confidence.

Overall, findings from the program evaluations were highly positive and provided strong evidence of participants feeling empowered to resist attack and challenge their attackers. From the evidence we were presented with, we are convinced that these outcomes derive from the feminist strengths and rights-based approach integral to WSDN-WT and would not result from a more traditional, martial arts-style program. Women undertaking this course received a package of interrelated components that together gave them the knowledge, confidence, and embodied learning of core skills to enhance their own, and others', safety. The essential strand informing each component was a belief in the fundamental right of all persons to be entitled to respect and to live in safety. Additional factors identified as contributing to the program's effectiveness included having small groups taught in safe surroundings by qualified women instructors. Being "qualified" clearly involved not only knowledge of physical self-defense skills but also having undertaken robust training to communicate knowledge and awareness about violence against women. It also included the ability to manage both wisely and sensitively a diverse range of responses to the material from already traumatized women. The participation of support workers alongside the women ensured individual women could be provided with safe, additional support if required.

On the basis of the evidence presented here, it seems likely that other high-risk groups of women would also benefit from being able to participate in self-defense courses targeted specifically at their needs. This pilot study also demonstrates the increased potential and safety deriving from such courses being presented in close collaboration with women's refuges/shelters. The success of this partnership model suggests that its replication is highly desirable not only in New Zealand but elsewhere as well. While such courses are not *the* answer on their own, the failure to recognize their potentially life-changing properties deprives many women of the power and opportunity to assume a powerful stance and command their abuser, "Get out of my home and don't come back!"

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