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Kicking Down the Barriers:

Self Defense and Social Change

By Martha Thompson

IN 1970, I JOINED the fledgling women's liberation movement at Kent State University. What a tumultuous year! All around me, people were participating in social change and undergoing personal transformation. In the early years of my participation in the women's movement, most of the political actions that I engaged in focused exclusively on external barriers to social justice. As the women's movement expanded and gained success, it became impossible for me to ignore ways that women and men internalize subordination and privilege. In the 1980s, I shifted my political and professional attention to developing strategies for interrupting people's unconscious

participation in sexism, racism, homophobia, class bias, ageism, and ableism.¹

It wasn't until I took my first self-defense course in 1988, however, that I observed personal transformations similar to those I saw in the midst of participation in massive and multiple social movements in the 60s and early 70s. Self-defense added a missing piece to the puzzle. Social injustice is not all in our heads and hearts—how we use and move our bodies reinforce patterns of subordination and privilege. By the time we are able to think critically about injustice, our gestures, postures, movements, and use of space already limit what we see and experience.²

As people grow up, their identities and bodies are



PHOTO BY BRIDGET CANAVAN

Chimera Women's Self-Defense instructors demonstrate the strength of a palm heel self-defense strike by breaking a board with it. Left to Right: A. Davis (breaking), Hope Robinson and Jennifer Sell.

influenced by their placement in a complex web of social oppression and privilege. Though there is enormous variation, most girls develop some ability to take up as little space as possible: they learn how to contain their movements, gestures, voices, body size, dreams, or expectations. Girls who have race and class privilege as well as those who challenge their subordination often develop a facility with some physical, emotional, or intellectual language of those in power that masks their containment; for instance, a superior demeanor, a loud and belligerent manner, an "us-them" orientation.

Self-defense training grounded in an understanding of power and injustice offers an opportunity to interrupt perceptions and movements of the body that

perpetuate patterns of inequality. In feminist self-defense training, women do not interchange aggression and submission, but learn confidence, calmness, and assertiveness. Women learn to take up *fair* space, not only learning to set their own limits, but also learning to honor the limits of others. Women do not simply discover the power of their bodies, but discover the power of integrating body, mind, voice, and spirit. Self-defense training offers the possibility of learning to move in the world in a way that challenges the "either-or" thinking that underlies social injustice.³

Self-defense training also has the potential to challenge media images and cultural myths that insist only extraordinary people and actions can prevent, redirect, or stop the

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PHOTO BY SUZANNE EARTH

An Impact student fights from the ground against a padded attacker.



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more powerful. Self-defense stories that make the news highlight the bizarre, the amazing, and the extreme. For instance, a recent Reuters wire service headline shrieked “Woman Bites Off Man’s Testicles.” Or in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, “Lara” defends herself against multiple attackers, robots, and killer statues with athletic prowess, technology, and reasoning powers unavailable to the rest of us.

Self-defense training reduces the paralyzing power of these images and myths. Participants in self-defense training discover that everyday skills, such as paying attention, decision-making, and acting decisively and confidently, are essential to self-defense. People learn that effective physical self-defense tools are as close as their elbows, hands, knees, and feet. Self-defense training offers

the possibility that ordinary people can do extraordinary things with the tools they already have.

Though its label misleads, feminist self-defense training is essentially a collective enterprise. Women, and sometimes men, work together to support, encourage, and share skills, strategies, and ideas about reducing violence and increasing safety. One of the many tragic consequences of sexual assault is the social isolation of a woman during an attack and, too often, after. Within a self-defense training situation, participants of diverse body types, backgrounds, and social positions work with, learn from, and encourage each other. An understanding of the power of the collective is fundamental to effective participation in social change. Self-defense training provides a real-life

experience in how to be responsible for one’s self while also supporting and working with others.

The potential impact of self-defense training goes beyond the individual participants in a self-defense course. Imagine the consequences if thousands of women in a community have feminist self-defense training. Not only would thousands of women be able to defend themselves from violence, but thousands of women would have experienced challenging gender norms, demystifying images and myths of power and privilege, combining ordinary tools to accomplish extraordinary things, and working with others for a shared purpose. Those thousands of women could set thousands more in motion.

The author, MARTHA THOMPSON, is a black belt student and instructor at Thousand Waves. She is an instructor and the coordinator of IMPACT Chicago: Self Defense for Women.

1. In the early 80s, I was involved in Chicago Women’s Uprising, which not only made connections among a variety of political issues but also made connections between individual consciousness and behavior and major social systems. I also teach sociology and women’s studies at Northeastern Illinois University and have published several articles on pedagogical strategies for creating social justice in college classrooms.

2. For more on this viewpoint, check out Sandra Lee Bartky. 1998. “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.” Pp. 25–45 in Rose Weitz (ed.). *The Politics of Women’s Bodies*.

3. My self-defense work and, therefore, this essay focuses on women; however, my recent work with Strong, Safe Spirit and Horizons in offering self-defense for the LGBT community is consistent with the ideas expressed here.

