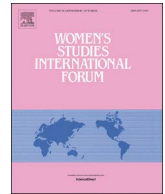


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'It's breaking quite big social taboos' violence against women and girls and self-defense training in Nepal



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ABSTRACT

Given the increased vulnerability to, and rise in reports of, sexual violence in post-disaster situations this article seeks to explore the role of self-defense programmes as a response to addressing violence against women and girls. It draws on the authors' experience of post-earthquake Nepal in 2015. We argue that self-defense training can play a crucial role in challenging normative gender roles, raising confidence and self-esteem in girls and women during and post disaster, and call for further research to take place at the local level to explore this important issue further.

Introduction

It is well documented that gender based sexual violence rises in conflict and post disaster situations (Chew & Ramdas, 2005; Global Fund for Women, 2015; Pittaway, Bartolomei, & Rees, 2007). The two earthquakes in Nepal in 2015 killed 8700 people and seriously injured 23,000, with over 1.8 million directly affected by the earthquakes (GoN, 2017). The government of Nepal reported that the earthquake had a more devastating impact on women than men. Approximately 55% of casualties were identified as female (GoN, 2015) and the UN estimated that 40,000 women were at immediate risk of gender-based violence in post-earthquake Nepal (ICGTF, 2015) with reports of increased violence against women and girls (VAWG) and a heightened risk of girl and child trafficking (CDPS, 2016). A key response to rising reports of sexual violence, especially in the temporary camps in and around Kathmandu, was the provision of self-defense training to women and girls by the Nepalese armed police force and a number of International and National Non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) (Standing, Parker, & Bista, 2016).

Despite the elevated risk of sexual violence against women during crisis situations the literature around the role of self-defense training for women and girls in the prevention of sexual assault in this area is often based in research from higher income countries in the Western world. Much of this literature focuses on experiences from the USA, and, frequently amongst university and college educated women (e.g. Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; Senn et al., 2017). Whilst this is an important and much needed area for research and advocacy, especially given rates of sexual assault on campuses (Gidycz & Dardis, 2014; NUS, 2010), it only tells part of the story of the rise of self-defense training for women

and girls globally. Much of the popularity of the self-defense movement, and the drivers and demand for training for women and girls, comes from low and lower middle countries in the majority world. However, self-defense training is often included in NGOs programmes for empowering women, such as the global Girl Effect campaign (Hayhurst, 2013, 2014), and there is evidence that programmes such as 'No means No' in Kenya have had some success in reducing rates of rape and sexual assault (Sinclair et al., 2013). In this article, we discuss the rise of self-defense training for women and girls in Nepal after the 2015 earthquakes.

The authors have been working with gender based NGOs, activists and women's groups in Nepal for over 20 years and the sources for this article are based on a review of the literature coupled with qualitative research including face to face, email, phone and Facebook interviews. In particular, the article draws on 20 interviews with NGO workers and women's activists from the authors' field visits between October 2015 and June 2016. The literature in the article includes reports from NGOs published and distributed in Nepal, national and international media coverage of self-defense training in Nepal post-earthquake, as well as wider academic book chapters and journal articles.

This article outlines the wider debates surrounding the role of self-defense in addressing gender based violence before contextualising this in Nepal. The article then moves on to explore the experiences of self-defense training in post-earthquake Nepal and what lessons can be drawn from this. The findings highlight the urgent need for research and evaluation into the quality of provision and the long-term impact on the women and girls who have taken part in self-defense classes and calls for more research in this area.

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Self-defense and the women's movement

Self-defense training was a popular activity for women in the UK and North America as part of the 1970s and 1980s women's movement, and was seen as integral to feminist campaigns to end sexual abuse (Searles & Berger, 1987; Thompson, 2014). The End Violence Against Women Coalition argues in the context of the 1970s and 1980s, self-defense training was 'about getting women to feel like they were strong, autonomous beings, with strong bodies, not presumed to be passive' (Green, cited in Cosslett, 2015, no page number). Self-defense training challenged discourses of women's powerlessness, allowing women to be active agents and recasting women's bodies as powerful (De Welde, 2003). The promotion of self-defense supported a wider move in the 1980s to place women centrally as decision makers and actors in cases of sexual violence, and to view women as survivors rather than victims of rape and sexual assault (Kelly, 1988; Reekie & Wilson, 1993). Self-defense training for women was based on evidence that active resistance strategies can deter the completion of an attempted sexual assault and increase women's confidence in their ability to defend themselves (McDaniel, 1993; Ullman, 2007). However, as debates around sexual violence shifted, the interest in self-defense classes declined.

Resistance to self-defense training as an intervention to prevent violence against women and girls came from both inside and outside of the feminist movement, seeing it as too difficult, too dangerous and contributing to a culture of 'victim blaming' (Hollander, 2009). The charge of 'victim blaming' is the one most frequently levelled at feminist advocates of self-defense training, as it is seen to shift the responsibility for preventing rape and sexual assault from perpetrators, to victims, individualising the issue and, in the worst cases, feeding into wider rape culture. This misrepresents much self-defense training, failing to differentiate between programmes which offer traditional martial arts programmes or courses (often taught by men), and feminist self-defense with an empowerment approach, which reinforce the idea that violence is a social, not an individual, issue, and is never the 'fault' of the victim (Searles & Berger, 1987; Thompson, 2014). Indeed, McCaughey (1997) argued feminist self-defense challenges rape culture because it challenges the essentialist media generated view of male aggression and physical power that men rape because of size and strength, and of female vulnerability. Discourses of heteronormative femininity continue to position female aggression as 'unfeminine' behaviour which self-defense challenges and subverts.

As Rentschler (1999) states self-defense provides a basis to respond to the spaces that women do not control, in the home and in the street, and to challenge and disrupt conventional gender norms and views of women, and women's bodies, as passive, silent and 'weak'. In this way self-defense training can begin to challenge gender socialisation which teaches women to be passive, inactive, unable to protect themselves and having to limit their mobility (Norrell & Bradford, 2013). Other studies, such as Cermele in 2010, have also suggested self-defense training can actively challenge gender stereotypes so that women are perceived by men (and other women) as independent, strong, and capable, and that challenging gender stereotypes may undermine male violence against women (Hollander, 2009).

Although the evidence on the impact of self-defense training in reducing sexual violence is inconclusive, there is evidence that feminist self-defense classes can empower women and increase their freedom of movement (Hollander, 2004, 2014). A study of the impact of a six week self-defense programme in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya by Sinclair et al. (2013) showed that a comprehensive programme can have an impact in reducing sexually assault. Likewise, Senn et al. (2015; 2335) found "a rigorously designed and executed sexual assault resistance program was successful in decreasing the occurrence of rape, attempted rape, and other forms of victimization among first-year university women in Canada". However, as Basile (2015; 2035) notes: "women-focused approaches used in isolation for prevention not only deflect responsibility

from potential perpetrators, but also represent only a partial solution. We can have a greater effect through combined efforts that also focus on potential perpetrators, bystanders, and broader community-level influences".

Whilst the research and literature remains largely rooted in the experiences from North America, there is growing evidence that women in South Asia are embracing self-defense training to fight back against sexual violence. In particular, the widespread publicity surrounding the gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in Dehli in 2012 (Chaudhari, 2015; Roychowdhury, 2013) led to interest in self-defense, not only amongst middle class women and girls across India, but also in Nepal and the rest of South Asia (Krishnan, 2014; Smith, 2016).

In a study of middle classes in Nepal, Liechty (2006) argues both watching films about, and participating in martial arts training are an important part of an urban male childhood in Kathmandu, playing an important role 'in constructing and imagining male bodies and male gender identities' (pg 14). The popularity of gyms and martial arts clubs in the cities of Kathmandu and Pokhara mean young men can practice martial arts and build a 'hyper-male' body and identity in public. This is something which is denied to women, traditionally confined to the home and private sphere, and therefore the idea of women doing self-defense or martial arts is in itself quite revolutionary, and this is part of its appeal to women and girls, which we discuss later in the article.

Even before the 2015 earthquakes there was a rising interest in self-defense classes amongst women in urban Nepal as a way to challenge sexual assault. Organisations such as Women Empowerment Nepal and Hollaback Kathmandu (<https://ktmnepal.hollaback.org/>; Prajapati, 2017) were running self-defense classes to empower women and girls to challenge the street harassment and sexual assault which Neupane and Chesney-Lind (2013) argue is an 'ubiquitous experience' in Nepal, reporting 97% of women experiencing sexual harassment on public transport (see also Paudel, 2011). Similarly, ActionAid (2011) found 80% of women had experienced sexual harassment in the city and 40% of men reported that they had harassed women. Self-defense classes were also introduced in workplaces to challenge harassment at work (Coyle, Shrestha, & Thapa, 2014). Organisations such as Fightback also worked with women in cabin restaurants and dance bars, acknowledging that regardless of feminist debates around the sex work industry, there is the need to balance women's economic activity with safety.

One reason for the interest in self-defense is also the involvement of women as active agents in the 10-year conflict, in particular as female fighters in the Maoist movement. Manchanda (2004) argued this opened up spaces for women's empowerment, and the possibilities of redefining gender and caste hierarchies in Nepal. The emerging feminist self-defense movement opened up one of these spaces and we discuss the importance of this later in the article.

In this context self-defense is seen by NGOs both as a means of empowerment and to challenge wider cultural norms about masculinity and femininity. The focus is on dispelling rape myths and challenging the view women are 'vulnerable', training focuses on the theme of empowering women and girls to end to the cycle of violence. The article now goes on to discuss this further in the context of VAWG in Nepal pre and post-earthquake.

Violence against women and girls in Nepal

Violence against women and girls during natural disasters needs to be seen and understood within the context of gender based violence in society in 'usual' time. Fisher (2010) argues, post-disaster violence against women and girls is a manifestation of women's pre-existing vulnerability to violence, which is exacerbated at times of disaster, exacerbating existing social and gender based inequalities.

Nepal is a deeply patriarchal society with a social culture that shapes gendered opportunities for women and girls, although gendered cultures and attitudes to women vary across geography, caste and ethnicity so it is difficult to generalise, however VAWG was endemic in

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