2001

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WHAT THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT FORGOT: A CALL FOR WOMEN’S SELF-DEFENSE

Lisa R. Hasday†

INTRODUCTION

When the issue of violence against women emerged as an issue in the early 1970s, feminists on both sides of the Atlantic responded by creating domestic violence shelters and rape crisis and counseling centers, in addition to agitating for legal reform.¹ These strategies remain dominant in contemporary feminist thinking on how to combat violence against women.² The funding provisions of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) constitute, for instance, a notable,

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modern arena in which such an emphasis appears. Enacted in 1994 as part of President Clinton's crime bill, VAWA authorized the tripling of then-existing levels of funding for battered women's shelters and currently allocates $80 million per year for rape prevention and education programs. As of the fiscal year 2001, more than $30 million in federal money under VAWA has been directed to institutions of higher education. Additional funding has been allocated to states and Native American tribes, mainly for establishing shelters and crisis and counseling centers; prosecuting offenders; training police officers, prosecutors, and health and social service providers; and researching violence against women and educating the public about it. VAWA also created a national, toll-free telephone hotline to provide information and assistance to domestic violence victims. What is so striking about the statute and the manner in which it has been implemented, however, is what has been left out. The government's response to violence against women makes no direct mention of providing women with the means to help combat the problem themselves: through training in self-defense. Moreover, self-defense was not even a topic of discussion during the legislative drafting of VAWA, according to those involved.

3. These funding provisions remain intact despite the Supreme Court's decision to invalidate the civil rights remedy of VAWA as unconstitutional. See United States v. Morrison, 529 U.S. 598, 601-02 (2000). Congress reauthorized the statute on September 26, 2000, appropriating $3.6 billion to fund the program for another five years. Violence Against Women Act Backed, WASH. POST, Sept. 27, 2000, at A4.


5. 42 U.S.C. § 280b-1c. Congress authorized $80 million per year from 2001 to 2005 "for rape prevention and education programs conducted by rape crisis centers, State sexual assault coalitions, and other public and private nonprofit entities for—(1) educational seminars; (2) the operation of hotlines; (3) training programs for professionals; (4) the preparation of informational material; (5) education and training programs for students and campus personnel designed to reduce the incidence of sexual assault at colleges and universities; (6) education to increase awareness about drugs used to facilitate rapes or sexual assaults; and (7) other efforts to increase awareness of the facts about, or to help prevent, sexual assault, including efforts to increase awareness in underserved communities and awareness among individuals with disabilities . . . ." Id.

6. See E-mail from Kristen Roe, Program Administrator, Violence Against Women Office, U.S. Department of Justice, to author (Feb. 21, 2001) (on file with author). $10 million was appropriated in both fiscal year 1999 and fiscal year 2000 toward educational institutions. The fiscal year 2001 appropriation is $10.976 million. Id.


8. Although many rape crisis centers offer self-defense classes, and some shelters have on-site instructors or make referrals to classes, their offerings are limited. See MARTHA MCCAUHY, REAL KNOCKOUTS: THE PHYSICAL FEMINISM OF WOMEN'S SELF-DEFENSE 17 (1997). The omission of explicit authorization for women's self-defense training extends even to the section of the statute allocating $200,000 for a national baseline study on campus sexual assault. See 42 U.S.C. § 40506 (1994). Topics to be included in the study are: security measures, communication of institutional policies regarding sexual assaults, reporting of campus sexual assaults, services for victims of campus sexual assaults, institutional disciplinary procedures and measures, and institutional liability for lawsuits based on campus sexual assaults. Id.

9. See E-mail from Sally F. Goldfarb, Associate Professor, Rutgers University School of Law, formerly Staff Attorney, NOW/Legal Defense and Education Fund, and chair of National Task Force on the Violence Against Women Act, to author (Feb. 16, 2001) (on file with author).
What appears to be the nation's current public policy against funding for women's self-defense classes mirrors the contemporary feminist movement's oversight of self-defense as well. A number of self-defense instruction books for women were published in the 1970s and 1980s. At least one current self-defense advocate, however, has observed that these manuals "impute deficient physical competence to women, rarely recommend violent techniques, and expect women to limit themselves in order to achieve some 'freedom' from sexual assault." In addition, the manuals tend to assume that women's assailants are strangers rather than people they know.

Outside of the self-defense manuals, Susan Brownmiller's advice is quite typical of the feminist literature. She made an early call in 1975 for women to "[flight back]," yet she warned against advice promising "that a sharp kick to the groin or a thumb in the eye will work miracles" and resolved that "impos[ing] a special burden of caution on women is no solution at all." Since the 1970s, when the subject of self-defense arises in the feminist literature, it is almost always in the context of the legal defense of women who have killed their batterers. These are women who have practiced self-defense, but in a very particular way: committed after they have been the victims of significant violence, and undertaken generally out of isolation and desperation. There has also been some literature on women's self-defense as it relates to the Second Amendment, but this literature has focused exclusively on the question of whether gun control restrictions should be relaxed for women.


11. McCaughey, supra note 8, at 51. The following remark in one training manual, for example, might offend one's feminist sensibilities for its portrayal of women as victims: "A man who can physically defend himself is less likely to be assaulted, and furthermore, he generally has an attitude or physical size and experience that decreases his chances of being victimized. We as women, by the virtue of our status in this society, live with this problem every day." SANFORD & FETTER, supra note 10, at 22.

12. McCaughey, supra note 8, at 53. This assumption ignores the prevalence of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women perpetrated by non-strangers. Self-defense classes have the potential to serve as a powerful antidote to these types of violence as well.

13. BROWNMILLER, supra note 1, at 404, 402, 399-400.


This paper explores the omission of physical self-defense as a planned, coherent, preventative measure for women, particularly in the allocation of grant money under VAWA. In Part I, I examine grant project summaries from campuses, Native American tribes, and states—and government guidelines discussing procedures for accepting or rejecting grant proposals. I find that grant projects rarely include self-defense instruction and that the VAWA program guidelines actively discourage prevention programs. I then speculate about why self-defense training has not received more support than it has, positing that self-defense acknowledges a level of societal danger and female physicality that makes policymakers uncomfortable. In Part II, I consider the profound impact that self-defense training has upon women in terms of both their physical and psychological assertiveness. This Part draws upon published materials on women’s self-defense courses; a survey that I conducted of self-defense students, instructors, and their pedagogical literature; and my own personal experiences as a self-defense student. It finds that women who undertake self-defense training commonly report increased feelings of confidence, safety, alertness, and empowerment. I conclude by recommending that those in positions to direct funding for the cause of combating violence against women start taking women’s self-defense training more seriously.

I. SELF-DEFENSE AS THREATENING

The government has not considered self-defense training to be a credible strategy for eradicating violence against women. Indeed, a representative at the


The answer to violence against women is not, I believe, for women to carry guns all the time. In the words of journalist Letty Cottin Pogrebin: "As threatening as the world can be, and as much as each harassed and beleaguered woman might be tempted to take matters into her own hands, the presence of firearms is known to up the ante on the hostility in any confrontation." Letty Cottin Pogrebin, Pistols for the Women of America, NATION, May 15, 1989, at 668. Besides, many prominent scholars argue that the Second Amendment provides only a collective rather than an individual right to bear arms. See, e.g., Akhil Reed Amar, The Bill of Rights as a Constitution, 100 YALE L.J. 1131, 1164 (1991) ("[T]o see the [Second] Amendment as primarily concerned with an individual right to hunt, or protect one's home, is like viewing the heart of the speech and assembly clauses as the right of persons to meet to play bridge, or to have sex.")

Scholars have also highlighted the inequity of constraining the Second Amendment to allow men, but not women, to be part of the armed services. See Linda K. Kerber, No Constitutional Right to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship 299-380 (1988); Becker, supra, at 497-99; Kenneth L. Karst, The Pursuit of Manhood and the Desegregation of the Armed Forces, 38 U.C.L.A. L. REV. 499, 579 (1991); cf. Brownmiller, supra note 1, at 32, 388 (observing that wars fought only by men push women to the periphery, and calling for full integration of the military); Christini L. Williams, Gender Differences at Work: Women and Men in Nontraditional Occupations 74-87 (1989) (examining attitudes toward femininity among male and female marines).
Violence Against Women Office (VAWO) at the U.S. Department of Justice, which coordinates the federal government’s efforts to implement VAWA, informed me during an interview that the Office will not fund grant proposals in which self-defense is the “focal point.” In the administrator’s words, there are “more pressing issues” at stake, and self-defense will be funded only if it is part of a more “comprehensive” plan. In fact, an informal survey of VAWA grant project summaries reveals that self-defense is almost never listed as an explicit component of a project. Only one university among the thirty-seven awarded grants since 1997 under the Grants to Combat Violent Crimes Against Women on Campuses Program specifies plans for self-defense courses in its project summary. Eight list “prevention programs” or other programs of that nature, which may include self-defense courses. This deemphasis on self-defense is hardly surprising, given program guidelines that actively discourage applicants from proposing “[p]revention programs that focus on victim behavior.” The funders reason that such programs “reinforce the myth that victims somehow provoke or cause the violence they experience” and “can create a false sense of security in women, who may believe that they will be safe if they follow conservative dress codes, never walk alone at night, or never drink alcohol.”

17. Id.
18. In response to a Freedom of Information Act request I filed on August 1, 2000, the VAWO sent me summaries of projects it has funded for campuses, tribes, and states. I was unable to obtain copies of those grant proposals that the VAWO rejected.
20. The eight campuses listing such programs are Idaho State University (“mandatory prevention and education program for all incoming students”), Jamestown College (“public awareness programs”), Prairie View A&M University (“prevention, education, and victim service programs for students”), Rochester Institute of Technology (“mandatory violence prevention program for incoming students”), Tulane University (“campus-based violence against women education and prevention programs”), University of Connecticut (“violence prevention programs using male peer educators”), University of Puerto Rico (“a campus-wide and comprehensive violence against women prevention program”), and Western Washington University (“campus prevention programs for student[s], faculty and staff”). Project Summaries, Violence Against Women Office Grants to Combat Violent Crimes Against Women on Campuses Program (on file with author).
21. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN OFFICE, GRANTS TO COMBAT VIOLENT CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN ON CAMPUSES PROGRAM: FISCAL YEAR 2000 APPLICATION KIT & PROGRAM GUIDELINES 12 (2000). Note, however, that not all types of prevention programs are discouraged. The Campuses Program guidelines advise that prevention programs should “focus . . . on changing cultural norms that sanction male violence against women and on publicizing the consequences of perpetrating violence against women on campus.” Id. In fact, one of the Program’s declared “special interests” is to “[e]stablish or strengthen comprehensive violence against women prevention programs on campus.” Id. at 6.
22. Id.
Outside the campus context, funding for self-defense is an even rarer occurrence. My examination of summaries of almost 200 projects awarded grants under the VAWO’s STOP Violence Against Indian Women Discretionary Grant Program unearthed only one that mentioned funding for self-defense.23 None of the approximately 400 summaries of state projects that I reviewed, projects funded under the VAWO’s STOP Violence Against Women Formula Grants Program, included any explicit mention of self-defense. These “STOP” programs, which stands for “Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors,” require each tribe or state receiving a STOP grant to allocate at least twenty-five percent of its funds to prosecution, at least twenty-five percent to law enforcement, and at least twenty-five percent to victim services.24 While the remaining twenty-five percent may be spent as the state chooses, not excluding self-defense training, such training is not listed as one of the purposes of the program.25 Other VAWO programs also make no mention of self-defense. The Civil Legal Assistance Program, as its name suggests, focuses on improving the access of domestic violence victims to direct legal services.26 The Rural Domestic Violence and Child Victimization Enforcement Grant Program emphasizes “increas[ing] victims’ safety and access to services, such as shelter and safe houses, advocacy and counseling.”27

23. The Yurok Tribe of Eureka, California had proposed to “implement women’s support and empowerment groups; providing professional counseling, weekend retreats and self-defense courses.” Project Summary, The Yurok Tribe, Violence Against Women Office STOP Violence Against Indian Women Discretionary Grant Program (on file with author).
24. See 42 U.S.C. § 2002(c)(3); VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN OFFICE, STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIAN WOMEN DISCRETIONARY GRANT PROGRAM, FISCAL YEAR 2000 CONTINUATION APPLICATION GUIDELINES 6 (2000) [hereinafter STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIAN WOMEN DISCRETIONARY GRANT PROGRAM]; VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN OFFICE, STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN FORMULA GRANTS PROGRAM, FISCAL YEAR 2000 APPLICATION & PROGRAM GUIDELINES 4-5 (2000) [hereinafter STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN FORMULA GRANTS PROGRAM]. The statute defines “victim services” as “a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that assists domestic violence or sexual assault victims, including rape crisis centers, battered women’s shelters, and other sexual assault or domestic violence programs, including nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations assisting domestic violence or sexual assault victims through the legal process.” 42 U.S.C. § 2003(8). The STOP Violence Against Indian Women Discretionary Grant Program guidelines define the term as “a nonprofit native organization not affiliated with tribal government but within the jurisdiction or service area of the tribal government that assists domestic violence or sexual assault victims,” citing battered women’s shelters as an example. STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIAN WOMEN DISCRETIONARY GRANT PROGRAM, supra, at 6. The STOP Violence Against Women Formula Grants Program guidelines define “victim services” as “including sexual assault and domestic violence programs, developing or improving delivery of victim services to racial, cultural, ethnic, and language minorities, providing specialized domestic violence court advocates in courts where a significant number of protection orders are granted, and increasing reporting and reducing attrition rates for cases involving violent crimes against women, including crimes of sexual assault and domestic violence.” STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN FORMULA GRANTS PROGRAM, supra, at 1. Needless to say, in neither the statute nor the program guidelines is self-defense training explicitly included in the category of victim services or, for that matter, any other category.
25. Note that the Violence Against Women Program Office seems to have no explicit policy statement regarding self-defense programs. Letter from Dorothy A. Lee, Paralegal Specialist, Office of the General Counsel, to author (May 11, 2001) (on file with author).
27. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN OFFICE, RURAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & CHILD VICTIMIZATION ENFORCEMENT GRANT PROGRAM 3 (1999).
My hypothesis is that police and prosecutor trainings, shelters, and centers have appealed more to feminists and modern policymakers because they, like the legal defense of battered women who kill, are after-the-fact strategies that focus directly and exclusively on women who have already been victimized. Whereas trainings, shelters, and centers serve women who have already been the victims of violent attacks, any woman would be an appropriate candidate for a preventative self-defense class.²⁸ Having large-scale self-defense classes of this sort would constitute an acknowledgment of a level of danger and antagonism in male-female relations that many feminists and society as a whole may be reluctant to contend with. Larry Nadeau, the founder of a nationwide self-defense instructional program called Rape Aggression Defense (R.A.D.), recognizes the painful reality that widespread women’s self-defense classes would reveal: “Most women fear for their safety at some point every day of their lives.”²⁹

Moreover, while shelters and centers are places for nurturing, self-defense focuses on violence and physicality in a way that is not culturally prescribed for women. In Brownmiller’s words, “Femininity has trained her to lose.”³⁰ Far worse than the physical differences between men and women, however, is the lifelong difference in mental attitude toward strength. Boys are trained to build their muscles and fight to win, whereas girls are encouraged to wear high heels and disdain competition.³¹ Moreover, many women might not want to think of

²⁸. However, the decision to enroll in a self-defense course remains the woman’s and the woman’s alone. This allows the act of enrollment to serve as a signal of independence, rather than a message that women are victims in need of help. See Von Lohmann, supra note 14, at 192.


³⁰. BROWN MILLER, supra note 1, at 360. Pauline Bart and Patricia O’Brien describe an interesting psychological experiment which found that a newborn kitten strapped into a “kitten carousel” developed in a deficient manner, as compared to a newborn kitten that was allowed to walk normally. Analogizing to humans, “[t]he practice of keeping women passive, doing things for them in the physical world such as opening doors and moving heavy furniture, not only gives women a feeling of inability to cope, but it alienates them from the physical world.” BART & O’BRIEN, supra note 1, at 106-07.

³¹. BROWN MILLER, supra note 1, at 360, 401; see also BART & O’BRIEN, supra note 10, at 59, 121. Margaret Gordon and Stephanie Riger reported that only 28 percent of women perceive themselves as better or even similar in speed and strength when compared to the average woman. Sixty-three percent of women think they are slower and weaker than both the average man and the average woman. MARGARET T. GORDON & STEPHANIE RIGER, THE FEMALE FEAR 54 (1989). The authors raise the possibility that women underestimate their physical abilities and behave in a restrictive manner so that “if they do what they’ve been taught and get raped anyway, they are more likely to get sympathy and support.” Id. at 122.

A more likely explanation, in my view, is that women have been taught that being physically assertive is unfeminine, and it is for this reason that girls have historically been discouraged from participating in competitive sports. See McCaughhey, supra note 8, at 41; MARIAH BURTON NELSON, THE STRONGER WOMEN GET, THE MORE MEN LOVE FOOTBALL 1-2, 45 (1994). As Susan B. Anthony observed in 1868 in her feminist newspaper, The Revolution, “So ground into the very souls of women is this notion of the excellent beauty of woman’s weakness, that there are those who think it isn’t pretty to exert even the scanty strength they have.” Susan B. Anthony, Home Truths, REVOLUTION, Jan. 15, 1868, at 17. This long-standing attitude is unfortunate, especially given modern research that shows that women who avoided rape were “substantially more likely to engage in sports regularly.” BART & O’BRIEN, supra note 10, at 59-60. A causal relationship is difficult to establish, but it is clear that some correlation between sports participation and rape avoidance exists. See id.
themselves as potential rape and domestic violence victims. Even some feminists might be reluctant to embrace self-defense out of fear that they will be branded "man-haters" or out of desire not to endorse what they consider masculine values. Feminism, after all, has historically been linked to pacifism, from the pre-Civil War peace movement to opposition to the Vietnam war. Self-defense is threatening because it injures men and, in a reversal of the usual state of affairs, provides women with greater autonomy while restricting male behavior. In a telling incident, an employee at the Chicago human service department responded negatively to a query about instituting self-defense classes in the city's housing projects even though rape was "endemic" there. The employee's explanation was that "the men would consider it hostile." As a consolation, she offered to establish counseling services for women after they were raped.

Women's self-defense—unlike husbands, home alarm systems, and crisis centers—involves what Martha McCaughey calls a "more radical outlook." Indeed, McCaughey argues that self-defense is a type of "physical feminism" in that it shifts how we, as a society, define women and their bodies. Rather than treating women as helpless victims dependent on men or (predominantly male) police officers for protection, self-defense trains women to use their bodies to protect themselves and fight back. Such training becomes all the more crucial as we acknowledge that women on the whole have not been able to rely on

Fortunately, more and more American females are becoming competent athletes due in large measure to the passage of Title IX, which prohibits educational programs receiving federal funds to exclude, deny, or discriminate against someone on the basis of sex. But regulations promulgated by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare carve out an exception to the statute for "sports the purpose or major activity of which involves bodily contact," defined to include boxing, wrestling, rugby, ice hockey, football, and basketball. Thus, traditional attitudes about women's physical capacities linger. A recent Glamour magazine article on women's boxing underscores this point. Accompanying the article is a photograph that displays not a female boxer but a skinny model wearing a long black dress and boxing gloves, and she faces not a person but a kangaroo! McCaughey, supra note 8, at 163-64.

American males, meanwhile, are encouraged from a young age to engage in athletics. A disturbing correlation exists between college sports team participation and violence against women. See Nelson, supra, at 129-30; Mary P. Koss & John A. Gaines, The Prediction of Sexual Aggression by Alcohol Use, Athletic Participation, and Fraternity Affiliation, 8 J. INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE 94, 102-05 (1993). As a case in point, the two students who allegedly raped Christy Brzonkala in United States v. Morrison were members of the college football team. See Morrison, 529 U.S. 598, 602 (2000); see also Renee Applegate, Making Football Fair Game: Eliminating the Title IX Contact Sports Exemption 2 (2001) (unpublished manuscript, on file with author) (arguing for the elimination of the contact sports exception to Title IX on the ground that doing so would help "undermine the role of football as an inherently masculine institution that produces and privileges a masculinity defined by physical violence and aggression.").

33. McCaughey, supra note 8, at 3-4.
35. McCaughey, supra note 8, at 3-4, 135.
36. Id. at 3-4.
37. See id. at 135, 150. The images of women depicted in self-defense brochures and other instructional materials project power and strength. For instance, the cover of a brochure I received at a women's safety seminar offered in New York City in the summer of 2000 portrays a woman who is forcefully elbowing a man's nose. She bears an unmistakable expression of satisfaction. WomanSafe Personal Safety Guide (2000).
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adequate state protection.38 It is not uncommon for police officers to, for example, dismiss as trivial women’s reports of violent attacks,39 especially if the woman belongs to a minority group or is poor.40 This unsympathetic response from law enforcers only exacerbates the anxiety regarding violence that women already have to confront41 and makes it less likely that women will report violence even when serious, if not life-threatening, crimes are being committed against them.

Until the state takes real responsibility for combating violence against women, and perhaps even then, women will continue to rely on a range of self-protective measures.42 In the words of one female resident of Harlem, a predominantly African-American community in New York City, “Now just because we don’t want the police involved, doesn’t mean that we don’t need to do something to have men know that they can’t get away with it.”43 One tactic that seems particularly effective is learning how to protect oneself physically.

II. SELF-DEFENSE AS EMPOWERING

Women may learn self-defense in a variety of formal settings, including padded attacker classes, martial arts courses, and self-defense oriented fitness classes. Padded attacker instruction, sometimes called “model mugging,” simulates actual fighting situations, enabling women to learn physical and verbal defensive techniques while their adrenaline is high and fine motor skills low, as they would be during a real attack.44 Martial arts courses also teach defensive skills, although they usually include neither instruction on psychological attitude nor information on prevention, as do padded attacker courses.45

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38. See KERBER, supra note 15, at 302; Barrow, supra note 15, at 65; The Collective, supra note 2, at 83; Sandra Marshall, Feminists and the State: A Theoretical Exploration, in FEMINISTS NEGOTIATE THE STATE, supra note 2, at 95. As one solution to this problem, Brownmiller called for “full integration” of police departments, by which she meant that such departments be composed of half men and half women. BROWNMILLER, supra note 1, at 388. Mary Becker suggested that the Bill of Rights, particularly the Fourth Amendment, be amended to require the state to respond to domestic violence and rape, including marital rape, in the same way it responds to other crimes. See Becker, supra note 15, at 508-09.


40. One study from 1987 found that police officers generally did not treat domestic violence among lower-income couples as seriously as domestic violence in middle-class homes because they discounted such violence as “normal” among the poorer classes. Kathleen J. Ferraro, The Legal Response to Woman Battering in the United States, in WOMEN, POLICING AND MALE VIOLENCE 155, 176 (Jalna Hanmer et al. eds., 1989).

41. Hanmer & Stanko, supra note 1, at 370.

42. Sadly, women trained in self-defense have faced ridicule from some police officers. See BART & O'BRIEN, supra note 10, at 43 (citing police mockery of a female karate expert who avoided an assault by using verbal threats and minimal force).

43. THE AFRICAN AMERICAN TASK FORCE ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, A RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN CENTRAL HARLEM 39 (Gail Garfield ed., 1998) [hereinafter AFRICAN AMERICAN TASK FORCE]. Women of color may be especially hesitant to seek assistance from the police because their communities may regard the woman’s act as contributing to racial oppression against men of color. In addition, women of color and other women in positions of relative powerlessness, such as lower-class women, may be reluctant to call the police because they fear that the police will perpetrate additional crimes against them.

44. See MCCAUHEY, supra note 8, at 59-69.

45. See id. at 78-86.
oriented fitness classes mainly revolve around the aerobic exercise involved. Some of these courses are geared specifically for students with disabilities, such as the blind and the deaf, who understandably have special self-defense concerns.

The benefits of self-defense are manifold. One result of a woman’s taking a self-defense course is that her ability to sense danger is heightened. Perhaps relatedly, women who take self-defense are more likely to resist a rapist altogether and, if attacked, are more likely to avoid being raped. Indeed, in one study, women who avoided rape were nearly twice as likely as raped women to have learned self-defense. Those classes that combine physical instruction with psychological instruction typically have an amazingly transformative effect on their students. The outlook instilled in the students seems to be as, if not more, important than the physical techniques they learn—and perhaps more difficult to master. A confident athlete in one course broke down crying, professing that learning to defend herself was a greater challenge than running a marathon or climbing a mountain. Another student said that, as a result of the class, she was saying “no” for the first time.

In addition to the assertiveness training, self-defense students “develop a new self-image, a new understanding of what a female body can do.” Susan Brownmiller’s three-month stint in a jujitsu and karate program stands as a testament to this metamorphosis: “[W]e women discovered in wonderment that as we learned to place our kicks and jabs with precision we were actually able to inspire fear in the men. We could hurt them, we learned to our astonishment, and hurt them hard at the core of their sexual being.” Self-defense teaches women that they are not inherently vulnerable and men not inherently invincible. Armed with this mind-set, “[w]omen credit their self-defense courses for all kinds of changes they make in their lives like getting divorced, starting their own businesses, going back to school, confronting an abuser, and getting over an eating disorder.”

After taking self-defense courses, women report “feeling stronger, braver, more active, more in control, bigger, more efficacious in a variety of arenas—

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46. See id. at 86-87.
47. Id. at 69, 84. This paper focuses on padded attacker self-defense classes, as these are the classes most commonly offered. Indeed, the students and instructors I surveyed were all involved in this type of class.
48. BART & O’BRIEN, supra note 10, at 114.
49. Id. at 29, 35; GORDON & RIGER, supra note 31, at 136. One self-defense brochure I reviewed estimates that women who are trained in self-defense increase their chances of deterring an assault by 75 percent. WOMANSAFE PERSONAL SAFETY GUIDE, supra note 37.
50. BART & O’BRIEN, supra note 10, at 61.
51. Id. at 62.
52. Id.
53. Id. at 95.
54. BROWNMILLER, supra note 1, at 403-04.
55. MCCAUHEY, supra note 8, at 122. One participant in a padded attacker course reported that after taking the course she no longer allowed her boyfriend to force sex on her all the time. Id. at 124. A self-defense instructor believes that her self-defense training enabled her not only to fend off an attack by a man on the street, but also to interact with her colleagues “from a position of strength” and to stop being afraid when her husband raises his voice at her. NELSON, supra note 31, at 47.
and less afraid.\textsuperscript{56} As a result, they may be better able to cope with the psychological effects of rape or attempted rape, if such incidents do occur.\textsuperscript{57} The psychological rewards associated with self-defense are acute for younger students as well. One recent study found that children between ages seven and eighteen who took karate classes dramatically increased their "perceived competence" in such areas as social and cognitive skills.\textsuperscript{58} Newsweek reported that parents today are "particularly eager for their daughters to learn to protect themselves," quoting a father who believes that karate will "instill confidence" in his daughter.\textsuperscript{59}

A survey I conducted that generated responses from twenty-two students and fifteen instructors of R.A.D. self-defense courses,\textsuperscript{60} and my review of instructional materials on self-defense, largely confirmed these positive results of self-defense training. A few respondents had the opportunity to apply directly the skills they learned from self-defense courses to real-life situations: A 20-year-old college sophomore from Texas reported that the "confidence" she gained from taking self-defense enabled her to reject the advances of a man at a nightclub who grabbed her and insisted that she dance with him.\textsuperscript{61} Self-defense skills proved invaluable as well for a 39-year-old psychological counselor, also from Texas, who effectively scared off three dogs that were chasing her by yelling a "‘NO’ that [came] from deep within [her], diaphragm level," as she had learned in her self-defense course.\textsuperscript{62} With students reporting stories like these, a self-defense instructor at Amherst College confided that there was "nothing . . . more rewarding than knowing that [she had] been able to help to prevent another victimization."\textsuperscript{63}

Moreover, those self-defense students fortunate enough not to experience threatening incidents stated that, as a result of their courses, they felt safer and better equipped to handle attacks that might arise. "I learned that I have the power to not become a victim," wrote a 27-year-old environmental worker from Florida. "I am more aware of my surroundings and can make better conscious

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{56} Gordon & Riger, \textit{supra} note 31, at 54.
\bibitem{57} Id. at 120, 136.
\bibitem{58} Susan H. Greenberg, \textit{The Karate Generation}, \textit{Newsweek}, Aug. 28, 2000, at 50.
\bibitem{59} Id.
\bibitem{60} My survey questions are listed in the appendices. I sent out e-mail inquiries to almost sixty R.A.D. self-defense instructors, from whom I received names and e-mail addresses of self-defense students. In order to ensure the anonymity of those who answered my questionnaire, I refer to them in subsequent footnotes as "Student Survey Respondents" and "Instructor Survey Respondents." For an overview of the R.A.D. course, see Nadeau, \textit{supra} note 29, and Michael E. Conti, \textit{Rape Defense: A Glimpse into a Parallel Universe}, S.W.A.T., (Jan. 1999), at http://www.rad-systems.com/Articles/parallel.html (last visited July 27, 2000).
\bibitem{61} E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 12, 2001) (on file with author).
\bibitem{62} E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 1, 2001) (on file with author).
\bibitem{63} E-mail from Instructor Survey Respondent to author (Jan. 31, 2001) (on file with author). Indeed, self-defense instruction has a profound impact on the lives not only of its students but of its instructors as well. In an expression typical of many instructors who responded to my survey, a San Diego police officer reported, "[teaching self-defense] has challenged me to think on different levels of emotion, humbled me beyond words, made me cry often, and given me much hope that we can offer a chance for women and children to survive." E-mail from Instructor Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 1, 2001) (on file with author).
\end{thebibliography}
decisions regarding my personal safety." 64 Another Floridian, a 23-year-old graduate student, reported feeling "so much more confident" as a result of taking self-defense. "I walk more confidently when I'm outside, especially at night," she wrote. "I look around and scan my surroundings." 65 These feelings of increased empowerment and alertness were typical among my respondents.

The benefits of self-defense training appear to have been particularly acute for those respondents who had been victims of violence prior to taking the course. 66 An 18-year-old college student in Texas who had suffered "back pain head pain bruises and broken ribs" at the hands of her step-father now felt "able to protect [her]self better." 67 A 55-year-old counselor in Texas who had been mugged felt more confident having learned some simple techniques to decrease the likelihood of being victimized. 68 A 26-year-old medical student in Florida who had been the victim of an attempted abduction was now certain that any future attackers "would be in for a hurting." 69 Three respondents who identified themselves as rape survivors were similarly enthusiastic about self-defense. A 44-year-old Michigan woman anticipated that she "would hopefully be able to get out of any situation alive and without being raped" now that she was trained in self-defense, 70 and a 42-year-old student from Texas wrote that the self-defense course taught her she "can defend [her]self if ever need be again." 71

Taking what is perhaps a more realistic view, a 39-year-old psychological counselor from Texas admitted that she "may choose in the future to not challenge [a rapist] but it will be a choice which is an empowering aspect on the road to recovery." 72

Respondents pointed out that they drew strength not only from the self-defense curriculum, but also from the other women in their classes. "[It helped to hear 15 other voices cheering your name, encouraging you to do your best, and never give in," explained a 22-year-old student from Texas. 73

64. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 6, 2001) (on file with author).
65. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 21, 2001) (on file with author).
66. While it is impossible to state with accuracy the percentage of self-defense students who have been the victims of serious crimes, anecdotal evidence indicates that such students are not an insignificant constituency in self-defense courses. A self-defense instructor from Florida who responded to my survey reported that four of the twenty-three women in her last two classes disclosed to her that they had been the victims of rape, stalking, or attempted abductions. E-mail from Instructor Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 2, 2001) (on file with author). See also NELSON, supra note 31, at 47 ("Women who study self-defense or otherwise build strength often have previously been assaulted.").
67. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 3, 2001) (on file with author).
68. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 9, 2001) (on file with author).
69. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 28, 2001) (on file with author).
70. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 11, 2001) (on file with author).
71. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 1, 2001) (on file with author). The idea of choice is central to the R.A.D. course, which announces as its instructional objective "[t]o develop and enhance the options of self defense, so they may become viable considerations to the woman who is attacked." R.A.D. Systems, at http://www.rad-systems.com (last visited July 26, 2000). A brochure for R.A.D. courses offered at Idaho State University adheres to this objective: "A woman must learn to decide when and when not to use force in self defense. She must make her own decision based on what is right for her at that point in time." IDAHO STATE UNIVERSITY PUBLIC SAFETY, SELF DEFENSE EDUCATION (2000).
72. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 1, 2001) (on file with author).
73. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 1, 2001) (on file with author).
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year-old, a writer, found the course she took at Yale University to be “intimate and educational, a support group as well as a self-defense class.”\(^74\) Indeed, in my own experience as a student of a self-defense course in New Haven, Connecticut, I was pleasantly surprised by the extent to which the participants socialized together outside of class and shared private experiences with each other. One classmate disclosed a history of victimization: She was emotionally and physically abused by her father, sexually assaulted by a stranger when she was fifteen, had her apartment broken into while in college, and was date raped while she was taking the self-defense course. She admitted that her reaction to this last incident was “to freeze and cry rather than react with anger,” but conversations with our self-defense instructor encouraged her to confront the man. “Because of the class, I had invaluable connections to someone I trusted and felt comfortable with,” the woman explained.\(^75\)

In addition to the bonds forged among self-defense classmates and between self-defense students and instructors, students reported sharing what they have learned with their female friends outside of class, who in turn are inspired to take self-defense courses themselves. Thus, as more women have the opportunity to take self-defense courses, the demand for such instruction grows.\(^76\) Anecdotal evidence from self-defense instructors around the country confirms this trend. “There is HUGE interest on our campus,” the Amherst College instructor informed me.\(^77\) An instructor at the University of Florida maintains a waiting list with the names of seventy-five students “and more are added everyday!”\(^78\) An instructor at the University of South Carolina noted that he is forced to turn students away from his courses, which he limits to fifteen students.\(^79\) Granted, these instructors’ statements may not be representative: While self-defense instructors whose classes are oversubscribed have, of course, a personal stake in publicizing that information, those for whom attendance and interest has not been as strong would be less likely to disclose that information.

The responses I received from self-defense students, which were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about self-defense programs, may also not be representative. The students I contacted were referred to me by their instructors, who had an incentive to direct me to students who had positive experiences in their classes. Nevertheless, a few of my student respondents conveyed some dissatisfaction with self-defense. One student, a 22-year-old who works at a domestic violence and rape crisis center, believes that some of the women in her self-defense class “gained a false sense of being able to fight off an attacker, and might feel that it is their fault if they are not successful in preventing an attack or

\(^{74}\) E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 1, 2001) (on file with author).
\(^{75}\) E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Mar. 8, 2001) (on file with author).
\(^{76}\) This demand is fueled in part by students who have already taken self-defense courses, as R.A.D. offers its students a “lifetime return and practice policy.” R.A.D. Systems, at http://www.rad-systems.com (last visited July 26, 2000).
\(^{77}\) E-mail from Instructor Survey Respondent to author (Jan. 31, 2001) (on file with author).
\(^{78}\) E-mail from Instructor Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 1, 2001) (on file with author).
\(^{79}\) E-mail from Instructor Survey Respondent to author (Jan. 31, 2001) (on file with author).
do not try to fight." Indeed, another 22-year-old respondent remarked that "[s]urely someone like [her] who's taken a self defense class would have the ability to get out of [a violent] situation." In response to a follow-up question I asked all of my survey participants about the downsides of self-defense, only three raised negative aspects of the class: "the emotions" the class brought out, the discomfort of having visitors to the class, and the disparity in physical ability among the participants. The other five students who responded to the follow-up question reported that they had no negative experiences with self-defense and knew no one else who did. Indeed, the large majority of the students who responded to my survey raved about the benefits of self-defense.

The sheer number of R.A.D. classes offered nationwide—and their low attrition rates—is a fair indication that self-defense courses are in demand. The eight instructors who responded to a follow-up question I asked about attrition rates in their self-defense classes all reported a very low rate of about one or two students from each class. The main reason these students provided was scheduling conflicts, although a few instructors indicated some additional reasons. An Amherst College instructor noted that sometimes she "get[s] the sense that the course is difficult [for those who drop out] because it brings up issues from their past." An instructor at the University of Florida remarked that two students withdrew because they said the physical portion of the class was "too strenuous even though we stress it's at your own pace," and another student said she was uncomfortable with the fact that the course involved physical contact with the male instructor. For the majority of students who complete self-defense courses, however, the experience is largely a positive one and they express interest in returning for additional simulations and practice work-outs, according to these instructors.

III. CONCLUSION

Statements from students and instructors of self-defense courses demonstrate the significant and long-lasting impact such training has upon women. Given these results, the extent to which self-defense courses rarely receive financial support from outside sources is striking. Several instructors who responded to

80. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 2, 2001) (on file with author).
81. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (Feb. 1, 2001) (on file with author).
82. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (June 6, 2001) (on file with author).
83. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (June 2, 2001) (on file with author).
84. E-mail from Student Survey Respondent to author (June 2, 2001) (on file with author).
85. E-mails from Student Survey Respondents to author (June 2, 2001; June 4, 2001; June 4, 2001; June 4, 2001; June 4, 2001; June 12, 2001) (on file with author).
88. E-mail from Instructor Survey Respondent to author (June 3, 2001) (on file with author).
89. E-mail from Instructor Survey Respondent to author (June 4, 2001) (on file with author).
my survey noted that their courses are funded by their police departments or by the universities with which they are affiliated. This internal funding is sometimes not enough to cover expenses and the instructors are forced to impose fees, albeit small ones, upon students. Interestingly, the only instructors responding to my survey who reported receiving government money were two instructors based in Canada.

It is perhaps an obvious, but nonetheless important, conclusion that American policymakers should channel more support—both monetary and otherwise—into self-defense, or at the very least not actively discourage it. In my opinion, the elementary school or middle school level would not be too early to begin exposing girls, or perhaps all children, to self-defense training. Of the women who reported being raped in a 1998 national telephone survey, twenty-two percent were under twelve years old and thirty-two percent were twelve to seventeen years old when they were first raped. Self-defense training would thus be a valuable component of a female American’s education, and VAWA has helped in the effort to make it so. However, it is clear from viewing the statute itself and records of VAWA grant project summaries that self-defense was a priority for neither the legislators nor the funding allocators. The prospect of women defending themselves—and deciding to learn how to defend—remains highly threatening, for what it implies about women’s autonomy and the prevalence and degree of violence in our society.

My claim is not that self-defense training should be the only solution to the problem of violence against women. That would clearly be neither feasible nor wise. But battered women’s shelters, rape crisis and counseling centers, and legal reforms should not be the only solutions either. It is difficult, and probably not worthwhile, to figure out which of these myriad strategies is most effective. The reality is that some 1.9 million women are estimated to be physically assaulted annually in the United States, and studies indicate that almost one-fifth of American women have experienced a completed or attempted rape. If we as

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91. See id.
92. E-mails from Instructor Survey Respondents to author (Jan. 31, 2001; Jan. 31, 2001) (on file with author); An instructor at the University of Guelph in Ontario received partial funding for her course from the government’s Women’s Campus Safety Initiative, and an instructor at Northern Lakes College in Alberta received partial funding from a “[p]rovincial government grant from the department of Justice.” Id.
95. It is even harder to know how to measure effectiveness. For example, are we concerned only about reducing crime? If so, what about under-reporting problems? How important are increased feelings of security as a measure of effectiveness?
96. Tjaden & Thoennes, supra note 94.
a society are to take these staggering statistics seriously, we must employ any and all strategies that may help to reduce the incidence of violence against women and to lessen the tremendous fear that many women experience given this level of violence.\(^97\) We might look to programs implemented abroad. Special women’s police stations, for instance, have been effective in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Peru, Spain, Uruguay, and Venezuela.\(^98\) These stations, which are staffed with females only, are designed to provide support specifically for women and might thus be construed as a kind of self-defense technique writ large. American policymakers and feminists might consider establishing programs such as these, as well as programs that empower women individually to defend themselves.

Self-defense for women accomplishes change in ways that other strategies do not. For it is only self-defense that transforms women at the fundamental level of the body. The conception of women’s bodies that self-defense engenders—what Martha McCaughey calls “the body as a bounded entity”—has the potential to become the basis for a new conception of women’s citizenship as well, in a society such as ours in which citizenship has classically been connected to fierce individualism and physical autonomy.\(^99\) In the words of one self-defense instructor, “There’s nothing morally objectionable about defending myself. I’m a good citizen for doing so.”\(^100\) Legislators, and feminists, would do well to heed those words and act accordingly.

**METHODOLOGY**

I sent the survey and follow-up question in Appendix A to over thirty students, whose names I received from R.A.D. self-defense instructors and from the self-defense course that I took. I received survey responses from twenty-two students. I sent the survey and follow-up question in Appendix B to almost sixty R.A.D. self-defense instructors, and received responses from fifteen of them.

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\(^97\). As an example of one community’s response to violence against women, the African American Task Force on Violence Against Women convened focus groups in 1997 to consider the issue and arrived at a “Community Involvement Model.” AFRICAN AMERICAN TASK FORCE, supra note 43, at 5. A group of young female participants proposed, for instance, that women educate girls “about how hard it can be to get out of bad relationships once you get in them.” Id. at 39. In response to community support for the idea of educating children—both girls and boys—about healthy relationships, a working group was established to “develop . . . mentors and role models as a part of creating a community response to violence against women.” Id. at 39-40, 46.

\(^98\). See UNICEF Report, supra note 2.

\(^99\). McCaughey, supra note 8, at 167-69.

\(^100\). Id. at 98.
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APPENDIX A:

SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR SELF-DEFENSE STUDENTS

I am a third-year student at Yale Law School, and am conducting a survey of women’s experiences in self-defense courses for a paper I am writing on government funding of self-defense for women. I received your name and e-mail address from __________. I would appreciate if you would reply to this e-mail with answers to the following questions. Feel free to skip any question you would prefer not to answer, and be advised that your identity will remain private. If you would like to receive a copy of my completed paper, please send me your name and address. Thank you for your time and attention.

1. Background. I am interested in exploring whether women’s experience of self-defense varies according to their background. Thus, please provide the following information, and anything else you think is relevant, to the extent you feel comfortable doing so. How old are you? What is your occupation? What is your race/ethnicity? What is your religion? Do you have any disabilities? How tall are you? Approximately how much do you weigh? What is your sexual orientation? What is your marital status? What level of education have you attained? Where did you grow up? Would you characterize your hometown as rural, urban, or suburban? Where do you live currently, and how would you characterize the environment there?

2. Prior experiences.
   (a) Before taking self-defense, had you participated in sports?
   (b) Before taking self-defense, had you ever hit anyone or been physically violent? If so, to whom had you been violent, e.g., an intimate partner, other family member, an unrelated acquaintance, a casual acquaintance, a stranger?
   (c) Before taking self-defense, had you ever been a victim of violence? Who was the offender(s)? Did the offender(s) use a weapon? Were others present during the incident(s)? What were the injuries you suffered, if any? Did you do anything or try to do anything about the incident while it was going on, before it happened, and/or after it happened? Did any of your actions help the situation in any way? Did any of your actions make the situation worse in any way? How do you feel about the incident(s) and your actions?

3. Self-defense course. What were your reasons for taking self-defense? What was the course like? What did it teach you? How did it change you, if at all?

4. Experiences since taking self-defense.
   (a) Since taking self-defense, have you participated in sports?
(b) Since taking self-defense, have you hit anyone or been physically violent (outside of class)? If so, to whom?
(c) Since taking self-defense, have you been the victim of violence? If so, please answer the questions listed in 2(c) above, as well as the following: Did taking the self-defense course help the situation in any way? Did taking the course make the situation worse in any way? If you have been the victim of violence both prior to and after taking self-defense, did your response to the violent attacks change in any way as a result of the course?

**FOLLOW-UP QUESTION**

Is there anything about self-defense and/or your self-defense class(es) that you dislike? Did you or someone you know ever have a bad experience with a self-defense class?

**APPENDIX B:**

**SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR SELF-DEFENSE INSTRUCTORS**

I am a third-year student at Yale Law School, and am conducting a survey of women's experiences in self-defense courses for a paper I am writing on government funding of self-defense for women. I received your name and e-mail address from __________. I would appreciate if you would reply to this e-mail with answers to the following questions. Feel free to skip any question you would prefer not to answer, and be advised that your identity will remain private.

1. **Course background.** For how long have you taught self-defense? What inspired you to take and teach self-defense? How much student interest is there in your course? How is the course funded?

2. **Course description.** How does your course operate? What do you teach your students? Do you follow any particular philosophy of self-defense? How have the students responded? What reasons do the students report for taking the class? How has teaching self-defense changed you, if at all?

I would appreciate any self-defense course literature and instructional materials that you would be willing to share with me. I would be happy to reimburse you for any related photocopying and postage expenses. My address is __________.

In addition, I would like to send a survey to students and former students in your self-defense course(s), and would appreciate if you would seek their
permission to give me their names and e-mail addresses. Please find below the survey I would like to send to your students.

If you would like to receive a copy of my completed paper, please send me your name and address. Thank you for your time and attention.

[Student survey attached.]

FOLLOW-UP QUESTION

I am wondering about the attrition rates for self-defense classes. That is, how many students drop out of self-defense classes? What are their reasons for doing so? I would appreciate any statistics and/or anecdotal information you have about this.