

# Women fighting back

## A Swedish case

**Elisabeth Biström** lives in Sweden yet she talks about exactly the same injustices that women suffer in South Africa. She is a feminist self defence instructor and she talks about why this is necessary and what happens on these courses.

**A**lmost every week, I read about a case of rape in the newspapers. And often the same debate follows: is it or isn't it women's responsibility to avoid being raped, by avoiding being at certain places at certain times, by avoiding drinking alcohol or wearing certain clothes.

I am an instructor in feminist self defence, a system that attempts to be a part solution to some of the problems women face as an oppressed group. As a feminist who has worked specifically with the issue of violence towards women for several years my answer to the questions above is: No, women should not be considered responsible for the violence, harassment and the oppression we are subjected to. Instead, we must find a way of analysing this oppression, and violence towards women in a way that makes it possible to change unfair and unequal gender structures.

It is easy to see that society is not gender-equal. Women have a weaker position than men in the labour market. We earn lower wages than men, partly because of discrimination and partly because the jobs and sectors which are considered feminine, are undervalued. We are underrepresented in

most parliaments in the world. We own and control less resources. The list goes on and on...

These facts aren't coincidental, but indeed systemic. There is a gender order, which benefits men and masculinity, and disadvantages women and femininity. It is not a new phenomenon, on the contrary it has probably existed in every society in all times. But at the same time, it is not a static system, impossible to change. The feminist movement has made enormous progress, and I am sure women's liberation is possible.

### SEXUALISED VIOLENCE

One of the most devastating and dangerous ways in which the oppression of women manifests itself is through men's sexualised violence against women. It is a widespread problem. According to the UN, one in three women in the world experiences physical assault during adulthood and one in three will be raped. This is regardless of race, age or class.

Sexualised violence often takes place within a relationship, and is therefore referred to as 'domestic violence'. As shown in a Swedish government study from 2001, nearly 50% of the women in Sweden were at that time, or had earlier been,

victims of sexualised violence in some form. In more than 80% of the cases, the abuser was a man that the victim was having, or had been having, a relationship with – a husband, an ex-husband, a father, brother or a male friend.

Although the feminist movement has for many years tried to bring attention to this fact, there is a common misconception that the majority of cases of violence against women takes place outside the home by an unknown abuser.

This misconception leads to a number of problems. One is that if you don't have knowledge about a problem, you will not be able to solve it. Another problem is that the women who have suffered violence have a hard time getting people around them and the authorities to believe them. Their stories get questioned because the reality and the perception of reality differ.

There are also misconceptions, or prejudices, regarding both the abusers and the victims.

The common image of the abuser is that he is deviant in some way – an alcoholic, a drug-abuser, an immigrant or a man with a mental disorder. And the image of the victim is that she is weak, defenceless or a promiscuous woman who has herself to blame



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*Young Swedish girls take part in a self defence class*

for being abused. In fact, both abuser and victim in most cases are perfectly 'ordinary' people. No specific type of woman is prone to sexualised violence, and abusers are found in all parts of society.

Even though the statistics show that the most dangerous place for a woman is in her home, many girls and women are more afraid to be out in public than at home, especially at night. There has been a major public debate regarding this in the last couple of years. We have demanded that women's fear of going outdoors should be regarded as a serious political issue and solved with feminist self defence for girls in schools and with actions to improve the city-environment from a gender point of view.

#### FEMINIST SELF DEFENCE

Feminist self defence (FSD) is not the only solution to sexualised violence. Many things can be done to improve women's situation and to fight violence. Since the problem derives from the unequal gender order, solving it has to go hand in hand with empowering women in

many different ways.

For instance, a condition for a woman even being able to leave an abusing husband should be that she has both legal and actual possibilities to do so. This includes an education and a source of income of her own. The issue of women's low wages is not only a matter of principle – it is also for many women a matter of life or death. Being dependent on a man can be devastating, not only in an abstract sense, but very concretely if the man that you are economically dependent on, is beating you. Therefore the trade union struggle to fight the underpayment of women, is also related to sexualised violence.

So, what is this 'feminist self defence'? It is a self defence system that is developed by women, for women, based upon a feminist understanding of sexualised violence combined with martial art-techniques.

Feminist self defence is for women only. There are several reasons for this. One is that there is no need for men to take a course in

FSD – they are not at risk of this type of abuse. Even though men are more often than women subjected to violence, it is a different kind of violence and it does not have its cause in gender.

Another, more important reason that FSD is only for women is the great need for women to have a room of their own. A room that is a free-zone where we're safe and have the opportunity to speak of our experiences of subordination, formulate strategies for coping and, most of all, for resistance.

FSD is based upon three important parts: knowledge, readiness to act, and sisterhood.

Knowledge is power. Knowing about the gender order, about women's situation and about sexualised violence helps women to stop taking guilt upon themselves for things they are subject to because of their gender. Putting the guilt on the oppressor instead of on the oppressed is crucial, if we want to be successful in fighting these injustices.

In working with feminist self defence knowledge is a large part. We spend a great deal of time talking about feminist theory and patriarchy in general and sexualised violence in particular. A workshop in feminist self defence can contain a short lecture on men's violence against women, but, often more importantly, discussions about the participants, own experiences of violence, threats, fear and abuse.

These discussions are an important opportunity for participating girls and women to tell stories they have perhaps never told before, but it is also a good starting point for finding constructive ways of handling the inferiority. This part of knowledge also includes knowing how to defend yourself against a perpetrator by using your body as a tool or weapon, which brings us to the next part: readiness to act.

By readiness to act, we mean preparing for situations where you might need to defend yourself against an assault. But it also means building up a more common readiness to act on your own and other women's behalf in situations which are not violent or threatening but still involve violations or other kinds of wrongful treatment.

We divide 'readiness to act' into three sub-categories: mental, verbal and physical.

The mental part is about defining violations of your rights as violations, not coming up with different explanations or mitigating circumstances. Not taking all the blame upon yourself, but listening to yourself and acknowledging that if you feel violated, diminished or wronged it is not your fault.

Verbal readiness to act is about verbal self defence strategies: how to use words and voice to get out of a threatening situation and claim respect. The physical part of feminist self defence, though it is just one part out of many equally important parts, is the most controversial part, and probably the one that generates the most attention. The idea is to learn effective and easily mastered techniques to get out of threatening or abusive situations. This includes striking back towards a perpetrator if possible.

Feminist self defence must not be confused with martial arts. The difference is that FSD has nothing to do with sport. You cannot compete in feminist self defence, and there are no set rules on how to perform it. The goal is not to master a technique, but to defend yourself in the most efficient way possible within the frameworks of what is legal in terms of self defence.

The third part of the feminist self defence system is sisterhood. By using the term sisterhood we acknowledge the universality of patriarchy, the resemblance between

## FSD workshops in schools

The Young Left in Sweden are trying to get Swedish municipalities to introduce feminist self defence into high schools. At present three of 290 municipalities have done so. In other municipalities, it conducts FSD workshops in schools where possible.

It has 120 voluntary instructors nationwide training at least 1 000 participants a year. Besides schools, instructors run open classes where anyone can join, and also run workshops on invitation from such organisations as the Red Cross, organisations for disabled women, womens' shelters, and Rotary-clubs.



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women's situations all over the world, as well as the solidarity between women.

We believe that building cooperation and solidarity between different women is of great strategic importance in our struggle for a gender equal society, and that discussing common experiences and learning together how to handle them are a powerful way of doing that.

When we speak of sisterhood in our feminist self defence courses we encourage participants to be attentive not only to their own situations but also to other women's.

We emphasise that by helping each other we also help and strengthen ourselves. This is a simple statement but as powerful as ever: no matter how strong you are by yourself, if you want to forge change you need to organise and cooperate with others.

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