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Standing, KE, Parker, SL and Bista, S

**'It's Breaking Quite Big Social Taboos' Violence Against Women and Girls and Self-Defense Training in Nepal**

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### Article

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## 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 et.al 2007). The two earthquakes in Nepal in 2015 killed 8,700 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 et al 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 (eg 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.

## 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 (Seales & 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 (Seales & 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, Lietchy (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 ([ktmnepal.hollaback.org](http://ktmnepal.hollaback.org); Prajapati, 2013) were running self-defense classes to empower women and girls to challenge the street harassment and sexual assault which Nuepane 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 et al 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 Nepal before the earthquakes in 2015 (Fernandez, 2012). Widespread

unemployment, poverty and the impact of the 10-year internal conflict made Nepali women and children especially vulnerable to rape, abduction and trafficking (Watchlist, 2005).

Domestic violence, marital rape, dowry-related violence, child marriage, polygamy, female infanticide, witchcraft accusations, forced prostitution and the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation are particular problems in Nepal (The Asia Foundation, 2012; Standing et al, 2016). Although women's groups, NGOs, and activists have lobbied the Nepalese Government to ensure laws and policies are in place, change is slow to occur, in part because of the lack of women's citizenship rights (Pant and Standing, 2011) but also because of the culture of silence surrounding violence against women and girls, making it hard to quantify.

There is an overall lack of data on gender based violence in Nepal, making it difficult to assess the scale of the problem, and where data is available it is inconsistent and under reporting is common (Kaufman & Crawford, 2011). Police records show that, on average, between 2007 and 2013 only 234 cases of rape and 114 cases of sex trafficking were reported. These low figures are in stark contrast to the UN and local NGOs' estimates, for example, the UN (2012) suggests that between 10,000 and 15,000 girls a year are trafficked from Nepal. Statistics also suggest that Nepal has the highest rates of child marriage and intimate partner violence in South Asia, with a study by Government of Nepal (2012) stating that 48% Nepali women report to having experienced some form of gender based violence. Official figures from the MOHP (2012) states that one in five women experience physical violence in Nepal and one in 10 experiences sexual violence. Most often violence is perpetrated by someone a woman knows, including by her husband or another male family member, as is the case globally. However, it has also been noted by NGOs such as WOREC that many women do not report or seek help (Violence Against Women Hackathon 2013).

Against this background of pre-existing high levels of VAWG, the problems facing women and girls in the aftermath of the earthquake were complex and their scale was



immense. In the chaotic post-disaster period, women and girls faced an escalated risk of sexual and gender-based violence, as, coupled with the inherent prevailing gender discrimination within Nepal, the community spaces and ties that provided stability and safety were violently dismantled (WOREC 2015). Many of the survivors of the earthquakes were displaced, and police estimated around 100,000 people moved into temporary camps (BBC News, 2015), with 34,000 people in makeshift government camps in the Kathmandu Valley alone. Some ‘camps’ were more a cluster of tents erected by family and community members, whilst others were more formal and linked to the larger development agencies, with the majority of displaced people living among strangers. Life in temporary camps can be hazardous, as women and girls face risks in everyday survival, for example using unsegregated or otherwise unsuitable toilet and washing facilities, or undertaking certain roles, such as gathering firewood. They are at greater risk of forms of VAWG already present in their communities, and of additional forms which arise as a result of the crisis. These include sexual violence, trafficking, child marriage, exploitation, and abuse. The breakdown of civil society and law and order, displacement of family and community structures, violent and dominant male behaviour, and the bringing together of disparate socio-ethnic groups and castes in camps means perpetrators often abuse with impunity, which we discuss later. Local NGOs reported increased violence in camps, for example WOREC (2015) stated of 400 cases of violence against women recorded during the immediate period following the April 25th earthquake the majority took place in the temporary camps and shelters. A survey of 3,000 households in the temporary camps found 83% women and girls reported of feeling of fear and insecurity with over 56% women and girls reported the fear of violence (CDPS, 2016).

A number of NGOs such as Maiti Nepal, WOREC, and Women for Human Rights (WHR) all reported that the chaos that followed after the earthquake also led to an increase in trafficking (UNICEF 2015). Trafficking rose because children became separated from their

families and the loss of livelihoods and worsening living conditions after the earthquakes for many families made it easier for traffickers to convince parents to give up their children by promising them education, food and a better life (Burke 2015). UN Women (2016) also reported an increase in incidents of domestic violence since the earthquake.

The reaction to the earthquake from women's organisations was swift. Rajbhandari and Susskind (2015) highlight the key role grassroots women's organisations played as first responders to the earthquake playing a central role creating temporary shelters and safe spaces that we discuss later. Five days after the first earthquake, the Inter Cluster Gender Working Group (ICGWG) was established. Chaired by UN Women this was a multi-stakeholder forum with over 60 members from INGOs, NGOs and smaller grassroots organisations who mobilised quickly to provide emergency aid and health care for women, and at least 500 women's groups in 14 districts mobilised to raise awareness and advocate on issues around violence against women and girls. One of the key ways this happened was through self-defense training in camps. Self-defense training was provided by a number of agencies, NGOs, women's groups, private organisation and the police. Given our previous research on the gendered nature of violence during the conflict in Nepal (Parker and Standing 2008, Standing et al 2006) we were interested to see if this was an effective way to empower women and girls and challenge gender based violence.

## METHODS

We used qualitative research methods, semi structured interviews and participant observation, as well as an analysis of Facebook posts and existing literature. We had a long-standing and well-developed network of key informants from the NGO community working in the field of gender and development who acted as gatekeepers for our research.

When the earthquakes struck we began following developments and responses which were documented through the use of social media, and in particular through Facebook, and themes began to emerge around the role of self-defense in the post-earthquake response. The use of social media platforms is central in capturing activism and grassroots collective action and responses (Harlow, 2011) and allowed us to capture the immediate experiences of facilitators and participants of the self-defense trainings. Analysis showed accounts of immediate relief efforts, concentrating on saving lives and minimising the impact of the earthquake, were soon replaced with stories of support and mutual assistance from within the affected communities, however, within a few weeks, incidents of VAWG were being reported to NGOs, and the longer-term impacts of the earthquake on the vulnerability of women and girls were becoming evident.

We subsequently gathered information through email/online, telephone, and face to face interviews with NGOs and key respondents in Nepal. Email and social media interviews in particular allow greater access to participants across time zones and geographical distances, having economic benefits and allowing participants flexibility to reflect and reply (Meho, 2006) and are useful in contexts, such as the natural disasters, where it may not be feasible or safe for researchers to enter (Opdenakker, 2006). Key informants were selected using convenience sampling in and around the Kathmandu Valley, one of the regions severely affected by the earthquake. We interacted with many other NGOS and women's organisations and groups across other regions of Nepal in the course of the research. One of the authors also participated in events during the 16 Days of Activism to EVAWG, met with a range of agencies working on the field of gender and human rights, and observations from this also informs the article.

In total 20 semi structured interviews took place between October 2015 and January 2016, the majority in English, but some in Nepali and then translated by one of the authors.

Informants' anonymity was important given the sensitive nature of the discussions (BSA, 2017), and key informants included representatives from police, international and national NGOs and participants working directly in temporary shelters in the field of VAW. However, the debates around anonymity of research participations, and ownership of data are complex (Grinyer, 2009) several organisations wanted to be directly named, in order to promote and highlight the work they were doing, so this article reflects this.

Several themes emerged from the data; the rise in VAWG in the temporary camps, the role of the police, the importance of safe spaces and self-defense as empowerment. The article now moves on to discuss these.

## SELF-DEFENSE IN NEPAL POST EARTHQUAKE

### RESPONSE TO RISING REPORTS OF VAWG

As discussed earlier, it is widely acknowledged that the violence against women and girls, which is commonplace in humanitarian crises, becomes more acute in times of natural disasters. Our previous research indicated that trafficking and other forms of violence against women and girls increased in the immediate post-earthquake period, (Standing et al 2016), and our respondents confirmed this:

There were hundreds of reported cases of violence against women and girls in shelters; however, we strongly believe more than half of the cases went unreported as these were violence or sexual abuse caused by close family members or neighbour or even under aged boys to younger girls. (NGO Worker)

Women and girls living in temporary camps and shelters felt threatened and insecure due to an increased risk of violence and lack of privacy, as one respondent commented:

During the first two weeks or so after the first earthquake, our Amma Samuha's [mothers group] ladies made a night shift rota to stay awake to guard ourselves, our daughters and children. There were very limited tents handed out by then so we had to sleep under open sky exposing ourselves to a lot of danger. Some male members of our families helped us too. (Member of local women's group)

Single women, widows and those whose husbands were migrant workers were viewed as especially vulnerable:

The women whose husbands were in Dubai or Qatar for work were at highest risk as they could not go back to the rooms they were renting. They were forced to sleep under plastic sheets with their young children. Women from our 'Tol Sudhar Samati (neighbourhood group)' helped them to stay safe. (Member of Sankata Tol Sudhar Samiti)

Whilst local community organisations, such as the 'Aama Samuha', (local mothers and women's groups) provided some support, women and girls who were separated from their families and communities were perceived to be at greater risk of sexual violence, trafficking, and abuse. A female key informant from a women's rights organisation in Kathmandu stated that:

Women and girls after the earthquake are even further down marginalised line. Girls are sometimes harassed seeking shelter with other families, if they are separated from their family it is a big problem, inappropriate touching was a big problem outside tents and inappropriate comments, girls are frightened to say anything, [they are] threatened with more harm if they say anything.

The breakdown of civil society and law and order, combined with hegemonic masculinities and the silences around VAWG meant perpetrators often abused with impunity.

In an online interview, a female case worker from the Gorkha district gave the example of:

[a] 14 year old girl who was looking after her two younger siblings was raped by her close relative while her widowed mother had gone to collect relief materials 3 hours walk away from their village. A local case worker suggested reporting it to the police but mother refused it as she was afraid of further abuse if they report it.

As one male activist commented on the increased vulnerability to women in camps and stated that:

Men abuse because they think they can get away with it, because women are isolated or mentally afraid.

This increased vulnerability was also noted by the police who visited the camps post-earthquake as highlighted in this statement from a blog

While visiting different camps in Kathmandu, we realized the need for such training so that women can protect themselves. Women and children are more vulnerable to sexual violence in this situation. The culprits are looking to take benefits of the situation. (Tara Thapa, Deputy Superintendent (DSP) of Metropolitan Police Office at Ranipokhari, cited in Rauniyar & Burke, 2015)

In order to support women living in camps and reduce the fear and risk of sexual assault, one of the immediate responses to rising reports of sexual violence by both NGOs and the Nepalese police was to provide self-defense training for women and girls:

We knew that after the Haiti and Japan earthquakes rape increased, the incidence of molestation was high, we needed to do something [...] to enable women to protect themselves. (Fightback)

Given the immediacy of the situation, respondents felt that although this may be a short term solution, it was needed in the camps:

I do think right now it's absolutely necessary for women and girls in the camps to be equipped because there is so little security and already relationships between the settled communities and transient communities are growing. As monsoon arrives tensions are going to rise and I suspect we will see growing numbers of reports of violence in general and in particular abuse/harassment of women around camps. While educating men/boys is essential this will take time and with all of the pressing issues in the camps this won't be prioritized. Women need to be equipped with some skills asap. (Female NGO worker)

Much of this initial training was provided by the Nepalese police, and responses to this are discussed below.

## ROLE OF THE POLICE

The Nepalese police mobilised quickly to respond to rising reports of sexual assault and women and girls feeling unsafe in the temporary shelters in Kathmandu, providing all female teams to provide martial arts and self-defense training in the camps. Police training, teaching women and girl's judo and karate and how to kick and punch, began in camps in the Boudha area of Kathmandu and expanded into other areas. Tara Thapa, Deputy Superintendent (DSP) of Metropolitan Police Office at Ranipokhari reported on police activities in a blog stating that:

We are teaching them several techniques, including how to kick and punch, as well as various locks. There are some lessons of judo and karate, too. Even a weak woman can fight against a strong man. This will help them to save themselves. (cited in Rauniyar & Burke, 2015)

This is supported by one of our respondents who said:

We teach different techniques, what to do if someone grabs your hair, how to hit the neck with your elbow and how to make him fall, how not to look weak, to be strong. Men rely on women's weakness but we say look at us [female police officers] we are strong, we are fighters, you can be too, don't be weak, be strong verbally and physically. (Female police officer)

Media reports of this initiative were overwhelmingly positive, reporting women's increased confidence (Burke 2015), and many of our respondents agreed with this, seeing self-defense training as positive not just in terms of empowering women and girls, but the wider message sent out to perpetrators that violence would not be tolerated by the wider community:

I think the training provided by the Armed Police Force was the most effective one as they were highly respected during earthquake recovery period and when there was a presence of police teaching girls and women to fight back, it really sent out the signals to not to mess with our girls and women. (Local youth club worker)

In particular, it was the presence of female police officers and the self-defense training provided by female officers in the camps which was seen as the most effective, both in terms of raising women's and girls' confidence, and in encouraging them to report incidences of



sexual harassment, 'eve teasing' and violence. One 22 year old women who took part in the safety training commented:

I felt safe around female police officers because I felt they understood what the girls in the camp were going through. They were easy to talk to and taught us how to stay safe and how to fight back.

Another participant in the training said:

I feel we need to learn this, to protect ourselves. We feel unsafe in the evening and boys try to touch us and tease us. I have heard about rape, I try to run anyway and avoid it, but now I can injure them before I run. (Female respondent)

An increased police presence was one recommendation by the NGO VAWG cluster group for women's safety in camps, however, male police officers were also seen as part of the problem with one NGO worker noting that:

many [people] do not trust the police, they were abusive, there are reports of the police abusing [women]

This is reiterated by Adhikari (2016) who reports examples of drunk males, and police officers, entering the camps and 'eve teasing girls'. One woman living in a tent in a temporary shelter said:

men that come here in the evening are not nice. Sometimes I see even male police officers joining the boys and teasing girls. The language they use is filthy. I don't sleep during the night as I am alone and don't know who will enter my tent at night.

Others were more critical of the police training, stressing it was short term, and not framed within a wider feminist, or empowerment programme. Training programmes were often very short, in some cases a day, afternoon, or a few hours, which can lead to a false sense of security, and did not address underlying issues of gender inequality:

The police only provided self-defense, not psychological support [...] it also may make the situation more dangerous and escalate the violence. There is little you can do in one days training, six months on [the] situation is still there. (NGO worker)

The wider limitations of self-defense in a society that restricts women's freedom and agency, as discussed by Basile (2015), were also acknowledged by training providers:

Traditional patriarchal society limits young women and women need to learn how to assert themselves in patriarchal society without disrupting social norms. In a social setting women can't always fightback in physical way, we start with empowering the woman to say no, Women need to know how to defend themselves without fighting back , we teach defensive positions, harm minimisation, it's not a solution to a big patriarchal problem but we can't tell women to leave, it's not our place to do that, in a social setting you can't impose solutions, you have to give options, we have to respect women's choice, have to give multiple options, we aim to empower women to escalate to the local authority but at the end of day the decision is theirs. (NGO worker)

This was a key criticism of the self-defense training, especially the short term nature of the police training, which responded to reports of rising VAWG in the camps, but did not address underlying issues and attitudes to women:

Our societies mind-set is that women are not valued and women's bodies are commodities to be used by men. The earthquake made more opportunities for men to abuse, but that is the societal view that must be challenged, that cannot be done in one day. (Head of NGO)

There was evidence however, that some self-defense training did begin to address wider gender inequalities, as discussed below.

## CREATING SAFE SPACES

An important factor linked to the benefit of self-defense training is the 'space' that it creates both physically and socially. Self-defense training provides a space not just to discuss issues affecting women, but also to challenge patriarchal ideas and dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity. In the temporary camps the need for woman only spaces were seen as central both to women's safety and ability to access support. Safe spaces for women in Nepal after the earthquake offered not only privacy and security, but also counselling and psycho-social support, midwives and health services, legal advice and gender based violence referral services. Approximately 60 female friendly spaces were set up across the 14 earthquake affected districts. For example, WOREC established 10 safe spaces in Dhading and Ghorka districts where women and girls can access psycho social support, GBV referral services, GBV trained midwives, working with other NGOs and INGOs, for example UN Women and the international medical corps.

In regards to the self-defense training, one activist criticised the fact that the classes were initially being run in open non gender specific spaces. She noted that:

Sometimes men want to come and watch, you need to create a safe space for women only. Women feel shy and don't want to show before men, it needs to be women to women only. (Female activist/NGO worker)

Many of the women using the female safe spaces were suffering from PTSD, having lost relatives and homes, as well as suffering gender based violence, both before and after the earthquakes. There is evidence that well designed self-defense courses do have therapeutic benefits (Rosenblum & Taska, 2014) and this was supported by our research:

These safety trainings seem productive as the women and girls manage to learn something new to boost their confidence and felt empowered, and at the same time they got to share their experiences and laughed about it which helped them to get out of the trauma a little more. (Women's rights activist and social worker)

The training offered by many of the women's organisations, such as Single Women Group (WHR), offered a more holistic approach than the police training, for example combining self-defense with laughter therapy, and other therapies (WHR, 2015). Women taking part had often experienced multiple discrimination and abuse. One respondent noted:

Women who we support were really frail emotionally since they returned from traumatic violence from labour migration in India, and earthquakes trauma made it worse. Their confidence has increased a lot after they have been on the self-defense training programme. (Staff at NGO)

The safe spaces provided not only support and training, but opened up a space for women to discuss future possibilities, one member of the VAWG cluster group commented:

The feedback from the women using the spaces generally has been positive.

One big theme has been that the women want these spaces to connect them

with livelihood opportunities/projects etc. While a safe space is absolutely necessary in the crisis immediately post disaster, and the self-defense training and awareness sessions are important and have been well received, what some women are saying is that for the longer term rehabilitation these organisations, through the Female Friendly Spaces, need to be focusing on women/livelihood/employment.

There was evidence that self-defense training was empowering women to take part in employment and enterprise activities, suggesting that the benefits of self-defense are longer term and holistic:

Young women of today are more outgoing and engaged in some form of finance generating activities. Self-defense training has surely helped them boost their confidence in otherwise male dominated and mostly hostile environments. (Representative from UN Women)

Self-defense classes thus serve not only to convince women and girls that they have the right, and capacity, to defend themselves, but also, as Ullman (2007) has described, how female-only self-defense classes were essential both to challenge traditional gender-role socialization.

## CHALLENGING GENDER ROLES

Whilst martial arts have long been popular amongst young men in Nepal, the idea of self-defense classes for women, especially in public, is a radical idea, and has the potential to challenge gender stereotypes as suggested by Cermele (2010) and Hollander (2009). Taking part in training was seen by many of those we spoke to as an act which challenges traditional gender norms:

In the context of Nepal, the idea that women are being encouraged in public to do this is quite radical [...] I think it's breaking quite big social taboos. (NGO worker)

In particular, respondents felt that the provision of self-defense training by the police, was in itself a 'radical' act within traditional Nepalese culture and society as it 'mainstreamed' and normalised the idea of martial arts for women:

So the idea that self-defense, and martial arts is something that is being encouraged and being mainstreamed (with the) police giving lessons to women along with other organisations, is in itself quite a breakthrough. (NGO worker)

Outside of the camps self-defense training was seen as empowering and part of the growing Nepalese young feminist movement to begin to explore issues around gender and women's rights:

I do know they are popular with the younger generation, which is a good thing as it's getting them energised and active around the issues of women's rights [...] it starts a discussion and girls are no longer accepting they are second class citizens. (NGO worker)

Nepal, however, remains a strongly patriarchal culture and women who transgress these gender norms can meet with resistance, as illustrated by the example below:

Culturally it's still not considered very appropriate for women to be doing that type of activity. I have a Nepali friend here, late 20s. I would consider her as being quite liberal and a very vocal woman's rights activist. She wanted to do self-defense classes with me but in the end her husband [who is] also someone who I would describe as

comparatively more 'Western' and 'progressive' didn't want her to do it. He thought it was "overstepping the line", and then her in laws got wind of it and requested that she didn't do it because they thought it was a bit "inappropriate". (Foreign NGO worker)

This is also highlighted by the following example from a Nepali respondent who reflects on the role of the wider family network in women's ability to participate in self-defense training:

The whole family, apart from the daughter-in-law herself, gets involved in deciding what is good for their daughter-in-law still in Nepal. Many women who are members of our co-operative group wanted to go to the self-defense training. So we decided to get a trainer and organise a training day. But over 75% of women pulled out their participation only two days before the training because their families didn't want them to attend. (Coordinator of women's co-operative group)

This illustrates the role in laws and the wider family play in reproducing, or challenging, wider cultural norms around gender (Parker, Standing & Shrestha, 2014). Many of the respondents noted that it was often young women who participated in self-defense training and argued that there was a need to work across generations:

I have noticed these self-defense trainings have made some differences to the attitude of many [young] females as they have started fighting back, verbally, more. I think we need to include middle aged women in these trainings so they will teach and transfer that confidence to their younger sisters and daughters. (Ward Secretary)

Similarly research by Hayhurst (2013) in Uganda, argues that young women who actively and subversively challenge the opposition of their families and community members who contest their participation in self-defense programmes take on the role of 'new agents of social

change', and that this may leave women and girls at risk of further marginalization, if wider structural inequalities are not addressed. Self-defense training in Nepal was seen as a way of raising women's confidence and awareness, but the need to educate men and boys, and to challenge wider societal views was recognised by all respondents:

Maybe there were some good outcomes from these safety trainings to young girls, at least to their confidence but this is not enough. We need to be training the male to respect women, to not to abuse them –not at the time of crisis or at any other time. (A local NGO programme leader)

A year after the earthquake women's NGOs such as Maiti Nepal, WOREC, women's empowerment network, 3 sisters, Hollaback and Fightback, continue to provide self-defense training for women. For example, as part of the 16days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence Campaign Women for Human Rights (WHR), an NGO, in collaboration with Oxfam Nepal, has been organizing self-defense training for women in various parts of Kathmandu Valley (Oxfam 2016).

## CONCLUSION

Both the immediate and long term effects of self-defense training for women and girls in post-earthquake Nepal have yet to be evaluated. This paper has highlighted some key issues but there is an urgent need for local level led research to be undertaken into the effectiveness and impact of such programmes. Evidence on what works to prevent violence against women and girls is inconclusive but a holistic, multi stakeholder approach, which includes educating men and boys, as well as women and girls appears to be most effective at challenging violence against women in low income countries (Ellsberg et al. 2015, Pittaway et.al 2007). A self-defense approach on its own was highlighted by participants in this study as having limitations



in how far it can challenge gender based violence. Studies such as those by Hollander (2014) and Sinclair et al (2013;2017) are needed in Nepal to evaluate the impact of specific interventions. Given the political turmoil and ongoing reconstruction post-earthquake this is not likely to be a priority in the near future.

Whilst there was recognition that self-defense training was empowering for women, and something which challenged traditional gender norms, there was also the awareness that it was a short term, 'sticking plaster' approach, which may raise awareness and confidence, and enable women and girls to minimise violence and harm, but wider societal changes are needed, including education, and that there is a need to focus on men and boys and the perpetrators of violence.

Further research is also needed into the providers of self-defense training and the approach they take. The immediate post-earthquake training in the camps was provided by the Nepalese Police Force, this played an important role in 'normalising' and legitimatising self-defense, making it acceptable for women and girls to attend. The visual impact of female police officers encouraged women and girls participate and for other NGOS to also provide training. However, there is a need to differentiate between self-defense training and an empowerment model which places self-defense as part of a wider holistic challenge to gendered inequalities. Whilst the police training was important in raising awareness and confidence, an empowerment model approach is needed, with co-operation between all stakeholders, including grassroots women's activist movements, police and the state.

One of the key characteristics of empowering self-defense is placing violence in its social context, holding perpetrators responsible for violence, embodiment, enabling women to connect with their bodies in a powerful way (Thompson, 2014), and offering a range of possible responses and outcomes, which enable women and girls to be agents of social change.

There is evidence of a growing young feminist movement in Nepal, however, our research indicates more needs to be done across generations to share experiences.

The degree to which self-defense classes in Nepal reduce levels of sexual violence in Nepal needs further investigation, however, from our observations they have a potential for subverting gender roles and breaking down socialisation which defines femininity, and women and girls, as passive and weak, and joining self-defense classes in Nepal can be seen a radical and feminist activity.

This article has begun to raise and explore the radical potential of self-defense training for women and girls in Nepal. It has argued programmes are needed to tackle the broader structural inequalities and gender relations that marginalize girls in the first place, however self-defense classes may play a role in empowering women, and may also contribute to challenge attitudes which condone violence against women and girls.

However, it is a small scale, Kathmandu based study, and further research is needed to know more about the kind of messages that go along with the self-defense classes in terms of broadening understanding of gender issues, and the long term impact self-defense has on women's lives and the wider community.

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*Department of Population Studies. Tribhuvan University.*

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