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## A Woman's Nature: Addressing Violence Against Women through Femininity in Poland<sup>1</sup>

By Abby Drwecki<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

This article is an investigation of women's self-defense courses in postcommunist Poland. I focus on WenDo, a women's self-defense seminar which is based on feminist principles and which seeks to empower women through changes in body culture: i.e. their physical capabilities, posture, demeanor and vocalizations when in a position of interpersonal threat or danger. Through an ethnographic study of this self-defense method, I show how WenDo's pedagogy is designed to lead to these changes. In addition, I question whether WenDo can be conceptualized as a form of women's empowerment which is disconnected from an organized feminist movement and is based on individualized self-improvement. Although most WenDo organizers and instructors are self-identifying feminists, most participants are wary of feminism and are invested in identities which privilege traditional femininity and domesticity. Therefore, WenDo limits its engagement with feminism in two ways: first, the pedagogy of empowerment in WenDo seminars emphasizes the strengths and limitations of women as an essentialized category. Secondly, the recommendations of WenDo generally focus on the danger women face from strangers on the street as opposed to violence within the family faced by a greater number of women. Despite these limitations, widespread participation of women in WenDo may constitute a culturally appropriate way of addressing women's status in an environment that is largely hostile to feminist organization.

*Keywords:* Ethnography, Women's Empowerment, Postcommunism

### Introduction

A group of seven women sat in a circle on the floor, in a room on the second story of a community center in a quiet neighborhood of Warsaw, Poland. One by one, they introduced themselves and told their reasons for participating in the self-defense seminar. Katya, a woman in her late fifties, tearfully told of her victimization through domestic violence and how she had chosen to attend this course in order to become more assertive. Later, when the participants were practicing saying "No!" in loud, strong voices, Katya was reluctant to raise her voice because "the people downstairs will think we're crazy".

My first impression of Katya was that she adhered to stereotypical Polish gender norms, sacrificing her own happiness for her duties to family and home. However, over the course of this self-defense seminar, where she learned to express herself in an assertive way, learned to use physical force to defend her space, and where her emotions and actions were validated by the course instructor and the other participants, she

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underwent a visible change in demeanor. She went from timid and tearful to gregarious and full of laughter. At one point in the seminar, she surprised herself (and perhaps others) when she sat at the front of the room, and with nothing but her bare hands and a loud shout, snapped a two-centimeter-thick board in two. All the other participants burst into applause, and Katya once again burst into tears, but this time they were tears of triumph. "I never thought I could do that," she said.

Katya's story is an example of the positive results which can occur when a woman participates in a self-defense seminar. This transformative experience took place over just a two-day period, during a beginner's training seminar for a self-defense method known as WenDo. WenDo's Polish website and official brochure refer to it as a form of "self-defense and assertiveness training for women and girls." Its participants and trainers have characterized WenDo as "mental self-defense", "the study of communication" and "a feminist form of self-defense". WenDo as a form of self-defense originated in Canada, where it is widely popular and is the oldest and most attended self-defense seminar in that country. WenDo was established in Western European countries like Germany and Denmark in the 1980s and 90s, and was introduced in Poland by German WenDo trainers and a Polish feminist organization in 2003. In Poland, WenDo seminars are less popular than in these other countries<sup>1</sup>, but according to the estimates of the Polish instructors, between 100 and 200 Polish women take part in these seminars each year. As a graduate student at Indiana University pursuing PhD research in anthropology, I had the opportunity to observe four separate WenDo seminars. When initially forming a research question for a dissertation study, WenDo's strategy of teaching Polish women assertiveness stimulated my interest in the connection of this type of intervention to organized Western feminism in the country. Over the course of preliminary research studies, I formed two main questions about WenDo: first, has the small group of women who are involved in WenDo discovered an effective way of addressing gendered violence in a culture largely hostile to feminism? Secondly, how is the body culture advocated by WenDo, which may seem antithetical to tropes of Polish femininity, embodied and enacted by the participants in these courses? Exploring these questions together sheds light on the nature of Poland's unofficial gender regime and the possibilities for *subverting* aspects of a regime which may lead to decreased empowerment for Polish women without introducing unfamiliar or threatening constructs like feminism.

## Methods

In this article I explore formation of and change in gender roles, specifically with respect to women's individualized empowerment and assertiveness, a realm that has often been overlooked in the ethnography of Eastern Europe. In my most recent period of research, conducted from October 2007 to June 2008, I attended and participated in four different beginners' level WenDo seminars in the cities of Warsaw and Krakow<sup>2</sup>. In addition, I completed 17 interviews with the instructors and participants of these courses, with the goal of learning about the motivations of the women involved with WenDo and their past experiences, as well as their opinions on the techniques they learned, the pedagogy of the courses, and the long- and short- term effects of their participation. I gained access to WenDo seminars through contacting a number of instructors during a preliminary research trip. These instructors agreed to allow me to participate in seminars

and to recruit participants for interviews. Their only stipulations were that I maintain participant confidentiality by using pseudonyms, and that I participate in the classes alongside participants, rather than strictly observing.

These investigations are a part of a larger program of research, incorporating various forms of self-defense (such as Karate, Krav Maga, and police-sponsored self-defense courses). The goal of these observations and interviews was in part to form a basis for comparison among self-defense methods; including a sense of how different types of courses attract participants with different goals, interests, and objectives.<sup>3</sup> The two methodological components of participant-observation and interviewing complement each other in that observation provides a view from outside, in which my views are colored by my own cultural background and assumptions<sup>4</sup>. Interviews provide the perspective of “cultural insiders” and their views on the same phenomena; participant observation also provides an emic or insider’s view in that I experienced what it is like to actively participate in these courses. In addition to data collection in the courses, I also engaged in more broad-based observation in Polish society, specifically among Polish women, as a part of learning the cultural context of their behaviors, body culture and comportment.

The interviewees in my study varied in age from early twenties to mid-fifties, all considered themselves ethnically Polish, and came from a range of backgrounds and occupations. However, in general all these women fit into a reasonably stable economic group, with steady employment and enough disposable income to pay for a self-defense seminar. The interviewees included members of feminist organizations, lawyers, journalists and homemakers. Among WenDo instructors were those who balanced WenDo with another occupation, and those for whom WenDo was a full-time job. WenDo instructors taught both regular “commercial” courses (which cost between 150-250 PLN per session or about 50-100 US dollars at the time) as well as cost-free seminars for victims of rape or domestic violence. I interviewed women on a self-selecting basis: I usually collected contact information from all or most participants and instructors at the end of each seminar and then contacted them in the following weeks to see if they would be willing to be interviewed.

Through conducting these interviews, I discovered an interesting trend: even though the WenDo *trainers* were for the most part self-identifying feminists and comfortable and familiar with feminist discourse, most of the *participants* I interviewed were reluctant to call themselves feminists, or even to discuss the topic in-depth, something that is not surprising considering the literature on Polish women’s skepticism toward feminist organization. Some the most favorable responses to feminism among the WenDo participants still included a qualifier, such as ‘I am not a feminist, but I believe in equal rights,’ or ‘I believe in feminism as a general idea, but not as dogma.’ As these responses show, despite the modest success of some feminist organizations in Poland, there is still widespread suspicion of feminism as a political movement and a philosophy. As I will detail below, these concerns are reflected in the way that WenDo instructors in Poland adapt their pedagogy to fit the cultural context.

### **Polish Women’s Body Culture in Historical and Theoretical Context**

Many of the complex processes at play in Polish society have roots in Polish history dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, during pre-communist

times, traditional roles in Poland took forms that were consonant with Western European cultures. According to these gender regimes, women's connection to family and private spheres were very strong, and there was a widespread expectation for women to remain modest, sexually chaste, and demure. Both men and women were expected to make personal sacrifices in the name of the nation, especially during times of war and partition, but men's sacrifices were conceptualized in terms of military service, and women's acceptable sacrifices limited to reproductive and caring roles.<sup>5</sup> In addition during this time, discourses of women as fragile and pure but also as morally superior to men led to a persistent cultural idea that women are responsible for violence committed against them, and any loss of "honor" that this entailed.

Later, during the communist era, a perceived dichotomy between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of the state was strengthened. During this time Polish national identity tended to revolve around the opposition between private and public, in which the Catholic Church and the domestic sphere were cast as havens of refuge from the all-encompassing socialist state. This led to a further idealization of women who fulfilled domestic and caring roles, and adhered to the religious model of femininity epitomized by the Virgin Mary. This occurred during a time when women were required by the planned economy to work outside the home and religious expression was restricted, so these roles were more difficult than ever for real-life women to fulfill. This in turn led to further discourses encouraging women to put the needs of others and the fulfillment of this idealized role above their own needs. Approximating this ideal of self-sacrifice was a main way in which Polish women gained social power.

Several social scientists have argued that in the transition to capitalism in Poland, women have suffered disproportionately in their social and economic positions (Matynia, 1995; Titków, 2000; Gal and Kligman, 2000a). For many women, it seemed that life was much harder under the new 'freedom' of a capitalist economy. Whatever its flaws, the communist system ensured women a minimum of job security, child care, and health care, although the imperfections in these systems led to the infamous "double burden" (Corrin, 1995) in which women were exhausted by balancing the demands of domestic work and a career. Despite such hardships, nostalgia for the period is well-documented in the literature.<sup>6</sup> Some types of government social programs have been revived in Poland, and a political party comprised of former communist party members (LiD) enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the late 1990's. More recently, though, Poland's accession to the European Union has led to anxieties about the stability of the family, national autonomy, and religious values, while socially conservative/economically neoliberal politics have come back into fashion.

A relative lack of feminist organizations and activities in Poland as compared to Western European countries is sometimes attributed to a return to "traditional" gender roles after the fall of communism. Scholars have also suggested other causes of the apparent rejection of feminism: 1) an association of feminism with the communist regime, 2) an association of feminism with rejection of femininity, heterosexuality and the family; and 3) a belief that feminism deals with trivial issues in comparison with survival in the economic climate of the transition (See Funk and Mueller 1994; Einhorn 1993; Graff 2003).

Another extremely important factor in studying gender in Poland is the role and influence of the Catholic Church, especially the prevalence of the Marian cult. The idea

of the Virgin Mary as the “Queen of Poland” and the role model and archetype of Matka Polka (The Polish Mother) have laid the foundations for a tradition of self-sacrificing, heroic motherhood, which is the basis for self-esteem and social status for generations of Polish women. More recently a younger generation of Polish women has begun to embrace practices of self-investment rather than directing their energies toward the welfare of others<sup>7</sup>. Practices of self-investment include not only consumption of resources to improve appearance and health, but also taking advantage of social programs, NGOs and women’s organizations which provide assistance in employment, reproductive rights and the prevention of violence. This group of programs and organizations includes self-defense seminars like WenDo.

A third relevant set of cultural factors which affect the formation of body culture in Poland includes the sudden ubiquity of pornography, sexual harassment of women in the workplace, and the hyper-feminization women’s dress and appearance<sup>8</sup>. These trends can be described as attempts to embody aspects of Western femininity and gender relations, as described by feminist theorists such as Brownmiller (1987), Bartky (1992) and Young (1990), as well as Wolf (2002). Such a construction of the Western body as beautiful has been shown in other cultural contexts by scholars like Kalchevya (2002), Ginsberg (2002) and Mindrut (2006). They can also be seen as a form of backlash against the de-gendering of the female body under communism<sup>9</sup>. Because of this backlash, women who utilize their bodies in ways coded as less feminine are often associated with lesbians or masculine women, which are still stigmatized groups in the current Polish gender climate<sup>10</sup>

Although not without its problematic aspects as I shall detail below, the Polish version of WenDo serves as a response to both Western feminist critiques of the women’s self-defense movement and anthropological critiques of imported or foreign social programs and NGOs designed to help women in postcommunist countries<sup>11</sup>. Some critics of international women’s NGOs have accused such programs of being inadequately attuned to the needs and culture of women in Eastern European countries and of essentializing the culture of these areas, that is assigning to people living in Eastern European cultures a set of defining and binding essential characteristics<sup>12</sup>. An essentializing approach is problematic because it assumes that people are bound by their cultural precepts and are incapable of actively negotiating these norms. Critics tend to see international programs intended to reduce gendered violence as measures of “modernization” or “civilization” which are enforced by outsiders, and which paradoxically divert funds that may be more effectively used to address deeper issues of structural violence.

Additionally, some feminist writers who study the US context<sup>13</sup> challenge self-defense philosophies as advocating the use of violence by women and taking up the “master’s tools” (Lorde, 1984). According to these feminists, the use of violence as a means of self-defense continues to implicate women in cycles of patriarchal dominance and coercion. However, my findings suggest that a psychologically based form of self-defense like WenDo may be an avenue for Polish women who are hostile to feminism to work against disempowering strictures of femininity. The Polish WenDo trainers’ framing of the pedagogy of WenDo is consonant with the worldview of the participants, who are often invested in a self-identity tied to motherhood, femininity, and some level of domesticity. Despite the valid concerns described above, my research shows that in the

case of Polish WenDo, training in self-defense certainly has benefits for women, and constitutes an interesting field in which to observe the intersections of gender and body culture in Poland. In the following sections I will explain the various elements which make up a WenDo seminar, and the discourses which surround the ways that this self-defense method is taught in Poland.

In the remainder of this article, I will investigate the ways that WenDo is designed to affect the bodily *habitus* (Bourdieu 1978) or body culture (Brownell 1995) of Polish women in order to lead to greater self-confidence and empowerment. The principle behind WenDo's training is that such a change in body culture will lead to a reduction in women's victimization in situations of potential violence as well as everyday situations. This analysis will also be informed by the phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty 1962) or subjective experience of WenDo participants based on interview data. Finally, I will discuss the ways that WenDo's pedagogical engagement with feminism is limited because of its adaptation to the Polish cultural context; preferring discourses of individualized feminine strength and essentialized womanhood to classic feminist language.

### **Polish WenDo: Negotiations of Femininity and Strength**

Polish WenDo seminars are full of language about individual rights and personal responsibility, discourses which are consonant with processes of individualization and differentiation occurring in other postcommunist contexts (Phillips, 2008; Elliot, 2008). WenDo trainers phrased the self-defense philosophy of WenDo in terms of individual rights to bodily integrity and respect for oneself and from others; rather than connecting it to a political feminist movement. The second major feature of Polish WenDo's pedagogy is a focus on essentialized characteristics of women, and much of WenDo's pedagogy is based on the idea that women excel as communicators and nurturers. By analyzing the techniques and pedagogies contained in the WenDo seminar, I will show how both of these features are prevalent throughout WenDo's attempts to transform body culture.

First, I should stress that WenDo is not the only option available to Polish women who desire transform their body culture by learning self-defense. Other options available include traditional martial arts (such as Karate, Judo, and Aikido), Krav Maga, which is marketed as an Israeli self-defense system, women's only martial-arts based courses such as Women's Self-Defense Program (a padded attacker course) and (Un)safe Women, a cost-free course sponsored by the city of Warsaw, which was a blend of practical martial-arts based techniques and safety tips.

I chose to focus on WenDo in this article because it was the only course I encountered which was comprised solely of women and for which all the instructors were women. WenDo trainers claim that the "for women, by women" philosophy enhances their connection with their participants and the relatability of their teaching techniques. WenDo trainers critiqued martial-arts based courses, stating that such physical self-defense techniques are useless without awareness of gender inequality and an understanding of the "psychology" of self-defense. They also cautioned that challenging physical regimens can be inaccessible to women who do not already possess a degree of physical fitness and coordination.

According to the WenDo trainers, one of the advantages of the WenDo method is that it is open to all women, including very young girls and elderly women, and women of all shapes and sizes. WenDo also offers special seminars for women who are vision-

and hearing- impaired, and for women who use wheel chairs. For all of these seminars, however, the main lessons are the same. “No one has the right to make you a victim; you need to trust your feelings and intuition, and to be sure of yourself: Don’t let anyone cross your personal boundaries without your permission”.

The experience of participating in a WenDo seminar, which took place over two days, with six hours of instruction per day, focused on training one’s body to react to stimuli in ways that might seem counterintuitive.<sup>14</sup> This bodily training is facilitated by emotional support, communication, and an atmosphere in which women are encouraged to see one another as allies rather than competitors. The most important active physical techniques we learned in this course were very simple punches and kicks, moves which did not require a large amount of practice to fully incorporate into one’s body culture, and which could be carried out without hesitation. Participants also learned precise ways to make the physical techniques more effective. In order to make a punch or kick more powerful, for example, students were taught to exhale and shout, as well as visualizing hitting “through” something rather than “at” or “on” it.<sup>15</sup>

The most memorable exercise of the seminar was one which I mentioned in my introduction, in which each willing participant had a chance to break a board with her fist. The instructor prefaced the exercise by informing us how many kilos of force it would take to break the board (8 kg), and how many kilos of force were contained in a downward blow using the fleshy “hammer” part of the fist would provide (30 kg). The instructor placed a small circle of paper was placed on the floor beneath the board and told each participant to hit “through” the board, following through to strike the circle. Not every woman broke the board on the first try, or at all. Some did not even attempt it. But every woman, regardless, received validation and praise for “taking a decision, and not apologizing for it.” This activity was meant as a confidence-building maneuver; that is, the movements employed here are not intended to be used against an attacker. However, the cerebral knowledge about the force needed to break a board, or a bone, compared with the potential force contained in one’s arm is dwarfed by the physical, kinesthetic knowledge conveyed here.

### **Feminine Self-Effacement**

The direct physical techniques of punching and kicking comprised about 40 percent of the course. Another 30 percent of the course time was used for indirect physical techniques which are not intended to inflict harm on an attacker, but which were intended to transform the bodily comportment of the participants. These indirect physical techniques are intended to undo some of the training in feminine self-effacement which is a crucial part of the traditional woman’s role in Polish culture.

Although an archetype of the “strong woman” exists in Poland, the strength of such women (usually mothers) is bound up in the discourse of suffering and self-sacrifice. This stereotype becomes especially salient in discussions of domestic violence. Often women are implicitly encouraged by the Church, the media, and even legal institutions)to remain in abusive relationships for the sake of their family and their religious beliefs.<sup>16</sup> For example, domestic violence law contains language that privileges the integrity and well-being of the nuclear family above that of any of its individual members (Minnesota Advocates 2002). In addition, scholars like Agnieszka Graff (2008) and Anna Niedzwiedz (2005) have shown the ways that imagery of a mother sacrificing



for her children has become a key symbol for Polish nationalists. Even within the context of women's self-improvement activities an ethic of self-sacrifice and self-discipline is encouraged, especially in fitness and weight-loss regimes.

The WenDo trainers with whom I spoke universally expressed a desire to help women assert their rights without abandoning the family roles which are highly valued by many WenDo participants. For example, WenDo instructor Ela said, stated "I don't want to tell them everything, that all their problems are because of the patriarchy or whatever. I want them to figure it out for themselves. If we say it outright, they won't buy it, because they don't consider themselves feminists." In this way, WenDo trainers like Ela, who self-identify as feminists and who are active in the Polish feminist community, adapt their feminist consciousness-raising tactics to the needs of WenDo participants who might be resistant to the idea of feminism.

This approach is consonant with the perceptions of participants. WenDo participants Ania and Aleksandra stated that their course participation changed their perception of womanhood, without a sense that they were losing or rejecting femininity. Ania stated: "You can finally see that women do not have to be passive, and that they don't have to...agree to everything. This is how it is good, because you can apply this in every activity of your life: in your home and at work, and on the street, everywhere." Aleksandra used very similar wording: "Other martial arts like Judo certainly taught me to discipline my body... but WenDo, that is more the psychological part, that was the most important to me...Even in my relationships with friends, and at work, it will be easier to say no."

Economic difficulties, blatant sexualization of women in the media and in work environments, and a large perceived increase in random street crimes are factors which lead to feelings of powerlessness among Polish women.<sup>17</sup> At the same time socially conservative elements in society express anxiety that women are becoming "too powerful" and that Polish men are emasculated, leading to a push toward strengthening the domestic role for women, discouraging their independence and empowerment.<sup>18</sup> The instructors of WenDo understand this confluence of factors, and therefore their courses are targeted at increasing self-esteem and assertiveness, and at counteracting norms which they believe contribute to a low self-evaluation, and feelings of powerlessness. Along with ideas about self-effacement and self-sacrifice, the dominant body culture among Polish women is indicative of, and perhaps constitutive of, their disempowerment.

The vast majority of Polish women are reluctant to use their bodies in what is perceived as a masculine way. At fitness clubs in Warsaw, very few women participate in intense exercises such as weightlifting or running. More often women chose less intense and more "feminine" activities such as yoga and dance classes. In public spaces, most women restrict their movements, taking up as little space as possible. Indirect physical techniques in WenDo encourage women to unlearn this training in feminine self-effacement, without necessarily leaving a feminine identity behind. WenDo is a method of self-defense in which women negotiate their desires to perform feminine identities while questioning the idea that femininity per se is victimization.

In the context of WenDo, this renegotiation occurs through setting personal safety boundaries, and acting quickly and decisively when those boundaries are violated. Women are taught not to try to become invisible, but instead to take up space. WenDo trainers implement this philosophy in their seminars through a variety of role-playing,

visualization and assertiveness-building activities. These included: role-playing activities in which one participant played the attacker, and the other portrayed how she would react, including both verbal and nonverbal signals; visualization activities in which participants were instructed to imagine a “bubble of safety” around their personal boundary and later practice prohibiting others to cross the boundary; and a “stability” exercise in which the trainer unexpectedly pushed someone from the side or back to check the stability of her posture and center of gravity.

### **Gender Essentialism and Habitus in WenDo Pedagogy**

In presenting these techniques of body culture, WenDo instructors attempt to frame the philosophies of self-defense and assertiveness in ways that do not explicitly challenge the identities or worldviews of the participants in the courses, by invoking women’s “nature” as rooted in a feminine body, but which discourage self-effacement and passivity. In other words, they acknowledge that bodily *habitus* can be transformed through practice and training, but they also believe that women’s self-defense training can be most effective when it follows the grain of women’s “nature” as intuitive, nurturing beings. Bourdieu describes *habitus* as a set of behavioral patterns, residing in the body, which are manifestations of internalized cultural values. *Habitus* results from enculturation and training that takes place throughout life, and manifests in ways of thinking, speaking, moving and utilizing the body. Crossley (2001) further describes the ways that scholars of phenomenology have taken issue with Bourdieu’s characterizations of *habitus* and proposes a compromise in the concept of a flexible and “moving equilibrium” that allows for agency while acknowledging the important role of enculturation and habit (2001: 112). In a way, WenDo trainers implicitly utilize Crossley’s compromise approach, merging Bourdieu’s “structured structures” and “structuring structures” (1977: 82) of Polish body culture, as well as WenDo’s unique body culture, with a more personalized, experiential view of self-defense participants’ corporeity.

While teaching participants to change the ways that they move and carry their bodies, WenDo trainers also employ cultural notions about the “nature” of women. They seek to provide women with ways to defend themselves while only minimally breaking out of accepted gender norms. Marysia, a trainer from Lublin, provides an example of how a woman can foil an unwanted advance by using society’s rules against the offender without sacrificing her feminine “nature”:

Let’s say that a young, pretty woman is riding the tram and there are a lot of people standing around her. ..and she feels somebody grope her, she is just going to assume that it’s an accident and ignore it. Then if it happens again, she’ll feel ashamed and she doesn’t want to stay on the tram.... But what we teach women in WenDo is how to psychologically defend themselves so they don’t feel ashamed. When that happens...they are not the ones who should feel ashamed ....We teach that a woman should point at the man who is bothering her and yell “Stop it! Leave me alone!” Then all these people will look at the man and make him feel ashamed, instead of the girl, who did not do anything wrong.

Despite the fact that teaching several strategies such as this one work against feminine norms of politeness and passivity (including shouting and making direct eye contact), the discourse of WenDo in Poland limits its engagement with feminism in two major ways.

The first way WenDo accomplishes this is through the use of gender essentialism as a positive means to help women become more confident and aware, and therefore better self-defenders. The use of gender essentialism in WenDo pedagogy rests on what women perceive as their special abilities and limitations. One manifestation of gender essentialism is the limit on the direct physical aspects of the training, those intended to inflict harm on an attacker. The WenDo method implicitly acknowledges that most women cannot match an attacker in brute strength, although the instructors never explicitly state it in the course, so as not to perpetuate women's self-conceptions as physically weak or incapable. The instructors teach participants to first rely on psychological prevention and safety techniques, and secondly on "tricks" such as pinching or gouging pressure points to escape an offender.

Additionally, several of the exercises placed a heavy emphasis on women's supposedly universal communication skills and intuition. In some of the verbal role-playing exercises, the line drawn between assertive behavior and escalation or "aggression" was very fine, almost arbitrary in some cases. WenDo's pedagogy did not speak of women's behavior in terms of provocation, but women nonetheless often were assigned the responsibility of defusing a potentially violent encounter. Their fulfillment of this responsibility depended on their communication and negotiation with an attacker, two social interactions which are culturally coded as feminine.

The use of "women's intuition" is a key factor in many of the prevention-based exercises in WenDo. The trainers and participants both considered intuition an important tool for establishing and enforcing one's personal boundaries. In one exercise, some participants closed their eyes and stood in line against the wall, while a second group of participants slowly walked toward them. When a participant who has her eyes closed feels a sense of unease (*niepokój*) or fear (*strach*), she was told to put her hand up in a "stop" gesture, stopping the approaching partner. We were instructed that the location of this feeling of fear often resides in the body: "I feel it in my stomach", or "I get goosebumps" were the most common ways of describing this intuitive sense of unease. After gesturing 'stop', the participant opened her eyes to see the proximity of her partner. This line or radius was supposed to correspond to the participant's comfort zone or personal boundary.

My own experience with this exercise was confusing on a personal and cultural level, and thus provides an example of cultural assumptions about gender and intuition in WenDo pedagogy. The first time I attempted this exercise, I waited until I felt this intuitive sense of unease, and when I finally signaled "stop" and opened my eyes, my partner's face was less than eight inches from my own. As I looked around the room I saw that the other participants had signaled when their partners were four to ten feet away. In discussing this exercise with the participants, during both class and interviews, they described this exercise as one of the most interesting and of the seminar. They did not view the assumption that women have an innate, intuition-based knowledge of their boundaries, best accessed by blocking their sensory inputs, as problematic. However, such rhetoric can exclude women who do not feel a strong sense of intuition or identify with other feminine characteristics such as "maternal instinct".

### **Self-Defense and Domestic Violence**

A second way in which WenDo limits its engagement with feminism becomes clear in its discussions of domestic violence. According to statistics on this problem in Poland, the home is the context for the overwhelming majority of violent incidents against women.<sup>19</sup> However, there was some skepticism among the WenDo participants I interviewed as to whether WenDo's self-defense training could be effective in such a context. Since the statistics on random street crime and rape in Poland are relatively low (although almost certainly underreported), it is arguable that self-defense training can only benefit a relatively small number of women.

All interviewees acknowledged that domestic violence was a major problem in Poland, and that a much higher number of women were abused by a spouse or a partner than were victims of violence by strangers. However, most interviewees also expressed a cautious belief that self-defense training could be beneficial in helping women prevent domestic violence, if only in providing them with the confidence to avoid such relationships. In cases such as that of Katya, who had lived in an abusive situation for many years, they expressed more doubts. Many of the participants, in contrast with the instructors, were not convinced that the verbal and physical techniques used for immediate escape from an attacker on the street would be useful for defusing a domestic situation. One participant expressed concern for Katya, saying that the physical fighting techniques learned in the course might make Katya's situation worse: "This could be considered escalation. I was wondering if that would be effective, or if it would worsen the situation."

In cases involving domestic violence, WenDo trainers did not take hard-line position, insisting that a woman immediately leave an abusive marriage or family situation. Instead they acknowledged the primacy of these domestic roles in the lives of their students, and stressed negotiation and assertiveness within these contexts. They provided information about crisis centers, women's shelters and other resources if requested, but maintained that such a decision was best handled on a case to case basis. Ela, a WenDo trainer who specialized in seminars for victims of domestic violence, stated, "I don't want to tell them everything, that all their problems are because of the patriarchy or whatever. I want them to figure it out for themselves. If we say it outright, they won't buy it, because they don't consider themselves feminists."

### **The Results of Self-Defense Training**

Despite the fact that the engagement of WenDo with feminist ideologies was limited, interviews show that women who participate in WenDo gained a feeling of assertiveness and confidence, implying the method is effective on some level. Bożena, who works for a Krakow feminist organization, has taken both beginning and advanced-level WenDo courses. When asked whether she had ever used the skills she had learned in the courses, she answered: "No...after you take the classes you have this confidence, it's kind of like an aura around you, and people do not bother you." It seems that to Bożena, the process of learning of physical self-defense techniques results in mental confidence, which serves as a preventative shield protecting women against would-be attackers.

Magdalena, a WenDo instructor, stated: "I've never had to use the physical skills from WenDo, but the mental skills, I use every single day. Having this confidence, knowing you have the right to stand in your own space, gives you... power." Magdalena also explained how the guiding principle of WenDo empowers women. "We call WenDo the science [nauka] of assertiveness. In order to prevent violence, we learn the 'art of communication'" "She explained that such "communication" can be verbal or nonverbal, and can take place in workplace or domestic situations, as well as in the case of a potentially violent attack. Nonverbal communication often takes the form of gesture and posture which indicates confidence and an ability to fight back if accosted.

Many other participants in WenDo courses expressed similar sentiments to Magdalena, saying that they have used the assertiveness techniques of WenDo in work situations and in situations with neighbors, as well as with strangers. Aleksandra states: "I liked it that I could take advantage of my own body as a tool for fighting" but she also emphasizes the psychological basis of the course, because "It would otherwise be too hard for me psychologically to...punch, because I might do someone harm. I had to learn that if I have to punch someone...it is not enough to hit lightly."

Janina, a participant who had previously participated in traditional martial arts and Krav Maga, advocated for an ongoing physical component to supplement the psychological training of WenDo. "I think it would be great if a woman could repeat it every two months or so, so that she can feel good about herself, so that her body can get the strength from it... if you can go to the gym and get a little bit of strength in your arms, that will be best."

All interviewees, both trainers and participants, denied that they advocated a widespread subversion of gender norms. Also, the definition of assertiveness that the WenDo seminar promoted did not include necessarily leaving an abusive family situation, but instead preferred a strategy of verbally standing up for oneself, communicating one's rights and needs, negotiating or defusing tense situations. Whatever their personal opinions might be, the trainers tended to avoid "disruptive" discourse within the WenDo seminar to avoid sounding too radical and pushing away participants, as Ela stated explicitly above. We as feminist scholars should not perceive this as a compromise in beliefs or a "cop-out". Rather, it is a way that WenDo trainers have adapted feminist principles, making them relevant to Polish women who would reactively turn away from programs which position the family or heteronormative sexuality as the source of women's oppression.

## **Conclusion**

The core of WenDo's pedagogy and practice involves allowing women to "get in touch with" the body in an attempt to effect change in ingrained body culture through psychological, emotional, and physical training. Although the mental techniques taught by WenDo instructors involve communication and negotiation, they are embodied in posture, gestures, and an "aura" of confidence, although it was difficult for my interviewees to define these changes when asked about them directly. Interview data shows that a focus not just on punches and kicks but also on one's bearing and posture enables these Polish women perform an alternative body culture without disrupting their feminine self-conceptions. According to my interviewees, the skills they learned in WenDo courses do not only apply to confidence in potentially dangerous situations, but

also in everyday situations, including job interviews or conversations with difficult colleagues.

Some Western feminists are uncomfortable with the principles of self-defense on grounds that it is a short-term solution for a deeper problem. According to feminists such as Clarke (1993) Bromley (1992), and McKinnon (1981), use of violence by women does nothing to address underlying norms of male domination, and can even encourage women to embrace masculine forms of coercion to conform to a masculinist culture. Bożena refuted such criticisms by focusing on the confidence-boosting aspects of WenDo rather than physical techniques, saying “There is no sense in just focusing on one thing at a time, just economics, or just reproductive rights, or just violence. For example, maybe you get fired because you have a baby, or maybe you are harassed at work because you are a lesbian...all these problems are connected; being assertive can help with all these situations.” WenDo, because it is not overtly focused on physical aggression but on communication skills and assertiveness, as well as a change in more subtle bodily techniques, may prove to be effective in a wider range of situations than other self-defense methods.

The women in my study found ways to resist gendered violence and feel physically and mentally empowered without significantly disrupting the hegemonic body culture of postcommunist Poland. Based on my interview data, participants did perceive benefits to their self-esteem and confidence, which allowed them to resist everyday forms of violence like harassment and bullying. However, further research is needed to determine the long-term benefits of participation, and especially the effectiveness of self-defense training in the context of domestic violence.

These participants’ expressions of individualized empowerment do not imply a radical subversion of the heteronormative nuclear family that is the location of the bulk of gendered violence. Rather, the practitioners of WenDo practice a form of resistance against violence and oppression of women through instilling self-worth and confidence in a culture that overall does not approve of feminism or any questioning of the hegemonic gender order. These women successfully navigate identities constructed in terms of the dominant Polish culture, while carving out a niche for empowerment and success. This research shows that women’s self-defense in a Polish context is well-received and effective when packaged in a way that highlights the differences between men and women, and plays upon women’s supposed universal strengths (i.e. nurturing, intuition and negotiation). Although some Western feminists might look askance at the lack of questioning of essentialist gender categories, the steps taken by WenDo in stopping violence against women have begun to help many Polish women to have greater feelings of personal safety and self-worth.

However, structural inequalities still exist for women in Poland that may be elided by a focus only on individualized empowerment. Self-defense classes may be seen as a necessary but insufficient condition of bettering women’s status in postcommunist Eastern Europe. More long-term research is needed to ascertain if Polish women will continue to attend self-defense courses in increasing numbers, and whether their reported results of confidence and assertiveness will bear fruit in women’s individual lives or improve conditions for women on a structural level.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Canada's organization employs over one hundred instructors and Toronto alone hosts at least one WenDo seminar per month ([www.wendo.org](http://www.wendo.org)), Germany offers regular courses in elementary middle schools, and commercial courses in all major cities. In contrast, there are 16 Polish trainers, and Warsaw (the largest city and capital) offered only two WenDo courses during my time in Poland ([www.wendo.org.pl](http://www.wendo.org.pl)).

<sup>2</sup> I also conducted a preliminary research project in the summer of 2006, attending a seminar in Katowice, and interviewing WenDo instructors in Warsaw, Krakow, Lublin and Czestochowa.

<sup>3</sup> My methods for this project consisted of participant observation in four beginning-level WenDo seminars in Warsaw, Krakow and Katowice, and of 13 in-depth, informal interviews conducted with WenDo participants and trainers (4 interviews with participants; 9 with trainers). Additionally, four other participants responded to an e-mail questionnaire. Other aspects of my dissertation project involved participant-observation in self-defense seminars such as Karate, Krav Maga, Women's Self-Defense Program and (Un)Safe Women courses, and 25 interviews with the participants and trainers of these courses. In addition to participant and interview data, I collected magazines, newspapers and other cultural artifacts to provide context about Polish culture and society.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in one exercise in a WenDo seminar, participants learn how to escape from a handshake-like grip. At first this seemed to imply that WenDo was teaching women that any man who shakes their hand might be preparing to attack them; and to me this seemed a very paranoid approach. However upon further reflection, I learned that Polish etiquette dictates that a woman is supposed to offer her hand first in a handshake. If a man shakes a Polish woman's hand without her offering first, this might be a sign that he does not respect her personal space.

<sup>5</sup> Bucur and Wingfield (2006) show how the few Eastern European women who fought in 20<sup>th</sup> century roles in Eastern Europe were discursively de-gendered by frequent references to their "virginity" or their status as atypical women.

<sup>7</sup> Some of the best-known discussions of postcommunist nostalgia include Berdahl, 1999, Boym, 2002, Bloch 2005 and Caldwell 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk, 2000, Mindrut 2002, Patico 2008, Matza 2009

<sup>8</sup> Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the popular Polish press. *Wprost* is one periodical that often contains sexualized imagery (see Graff 2008b).

<sup>9</sup> See Dolling (1994) for a case study on the changes occurring during the transition regarding women's images in popular magazines in Germany; Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk (2000) for discussions of such images in Poland.

<sup>10</sup> Gay rights are restricted in Poland and the presence of gay marriage elsewhere in Europe has been a source of great anxiety for conservative Poles.

<sup>11</sup> Hemment 2005; Johnson and Robinson 2007

<sup>12</sup> Hemment (2005), Johnson (2005), Ishkanian (2004), Mrsevic (2000)

<sup>14</sup> See Madden and Sokol 1997, Lonsway 1996, Corcoran 1992, cf. Hollander 2009.

<sup>14</sup> I attended four separate WenDo seminars, for a total of eight days of observation. Since I attended seminars with a variety of different instructors I felt that this approach provided a good sense of the variation in teaching styles, as well as the techniques that remained constant during all seminars. Although the scope of this study was limited, a study of WenDo is important because is one of the most well-publicized self-defense methods for Polish women, and is positioned by some Polish feminists as a universal solution for women's empowerment.

<sup>15</sup> Polish preposition "przez" versus "na"

<sup>16</sup> Government official Magdalena Środa stated at a conference in Stockholm in 2004 that "The Catholic church does not directly endorse, but it also does not oppose violence against women. Direct links exist between Catholicism and violence against women..." See also Matynia 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Crime statistics before 1989 are almost nonexistent, and the perceived increase may be due to the increased visibility of crime in the media; Current statistics indicate that Polish relatively safe compared with U.S. when it comes to violence perpetrated by strangers (Minnesota Advocates 2002) See also Fuszara 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Graff 2008a (Rykoszetem)

<sup>19</sup> Minnesota Advocates 2002 "Domestic Violence in Poland"; Mrozik 2006

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