

# Female Self-Defence Training in Canadian Schools

By Donna Laframboise

*Dans le domaine de la violence, même les féministes chevronnées comptent toujours sur la confiance aveugle, l'espoir et la prière pour réduire le nombre de victimes plutôt que sur des actions concrètes. Le présent article préconise l'instauration de cours d'auto-défense pour les femmes dans toutes les écoles secondaires. L'article soutient que ne pas agir ainsi équivaudrait à un refus d'immuniser des personnes ayant une chance sur quatre de contracter une maladie potentiellement mortelle.*

Ted and Caity are five and two-years-old respectively. Much of Ted's imaginary life involves acts of courage, demonstrations of physical strength and conflict with bad guys. His role models include the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, the Ghostbusters, Hercules and Popeye. Television, storybooks and playmates have contributed to a general theme: heroes are capable of taking care of themselves and are admired for protecting and rescuing others. Ted wants to be a hero.

Caity, following her brother's lead, wants to be one too. Their mother, a feminist friend, has rented the Supergirl video for their benefit, and last Halloween they were a pair: Superman and Supergirl kept the goblins at bay.

Yet despite the best efforts of their parents, and the progress that's been made on gender issues over the past few decades, popular culture continues to send these children very different messages. Heroes are almost always male, while physically impotent individuals are almost always female.

If Caity's elementary school gym classes are anything like mine were, there's a good chance that they too will leave her

feeling less than physically competent. The kinds of team dynamics which accompanied group sports ensured that those of us who weren't already somewhat skilled (with girls being over represented in this category) didn't get much practice. My years of physical education succeeded only in convincing me that I was a complete klutz.

Caity's also going to begin picking up on those incessant messages about her appearance soon. The barbie doll fashions, the weight loss advertisements, the glamour photography. Even if she does wear A and B, even if she does do C and D to her face, her hair, her hips, her thighs — they'll be whispering that she doesn't quite measure up.

Realizing that, even in the nineties, impressionable female minds continue to have their confidence in their own bodies undermined rather systematically is bad enough. But when one also knows that Caity, solely because she's female, runs an appallingly high risk of being on the receiving end of physical aggression, an especially distressing connection becomes apparent.

It doesn't seem to be an accident that violence takes such a high toll on that group in society which has been most convinced of its physical ineptness and inadequacy. It would appear that women are victimized in such large numbers partly because we've all been told *and believe* that female bodies are somewhat lacking. Although it's assumed that men, despite their variations in height and weight, are able to physically defend themselves ("the smaller guys were the pluckier ones" reports an article about former police officers), women are thought to be generally incapable of it.

The crucial question then becomes: how can these misconceptions be effectively countered, how do we interrupt such a destructive pattern?

We know that 1 in 4 Canadian women are sexually assaulted sometime in their lives. We know that 1 in 10 are battered by their partners. We're more than familiar with the kinds of long term emotional and psychological damage associated with such violence. We know that more than half of adult females are afraid to go for evening walks in their own neighbourhood. So why haven't we taken one of the most obvious first steps in addressing such a situation? Why haven't we demanded universal female self-defence training in junior and senior high school?

If young women had a 1 in 4 chance of contracting a terrible disease, would we send them out into the world without immunizing them first? Would we be content to trust their lives to authorities who said they were doing their best to eradicate the virus? Would we feel that merely warning these women to stay away from anyone who looked like a carrier was sufficient?

Hardly. Even if the shots didn't absolutely guarantee that they'd remain healthy, we'd demand that young women be inoculated. And we wouldn't take "no" for an answer.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, there's still a good deal of denial going on. When it comes to violence, even seasoned feminists continue to rely on blind faith, on hope, on prayer — rather than on concrete steps aimed at reducing the casualty rates. Inoculating half the population might not, in itself, be a particularly gratifying experience. And immunization is about injecting small amounts of the disease into

ourselves, since this is precisely why our systems are able to resist the real thing later. But ignoring this option is a little like demanding a disease-free world when we know that this is impossible in the short term. It's all very well to say things like "men are the problem so it's them, not women, who have to change." Yet such a response appears inadequate, if not irrelevant, in the face of an ever-mounting number of shattered female lives here and now.

The idea of providing self-defence training for female students isn't a new one. In Toronto, the Wen-Do Women's Self-Defence Corporation has taught courses in Toronto schools intermittently over the past fifteen years. This year, thirteen courses will be offered in secondary schools and an additional seven to girls in grades seven and eight.

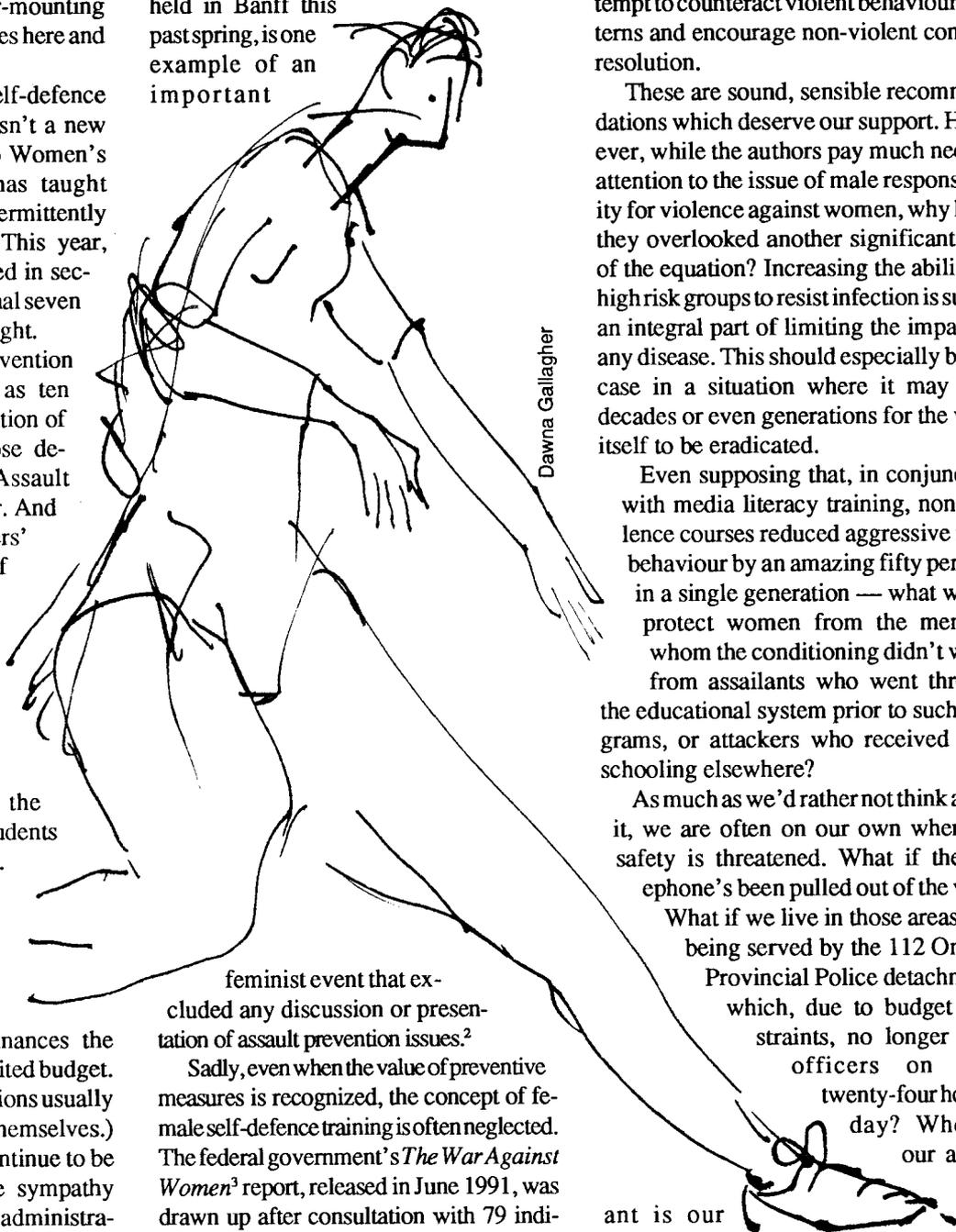
The Montreal Assault Prevention Centre will offer as many as ten Action courses (an amalgamation of Wen-Do techniques and those devised by the Ohio Child Assault Prevention program) this year. And the British Columbia Teachers' Federation's annual Status of Women Conference last October included a workshop on a female self-defence teaching unit designed to be inserted into the standard physical education curriculum.

As yet, however, only the smallest minority of female students receive such instruction. Funding remains anything but guaranteed. (In Toronto the Women's Studies section of the Board of Education, sometimes with assistance from community groups, finances the Wen-Do courses out of its limited budget. In Montreal, parents' associations usually scrape together the money themselves.) Moreover, these programs continue to be entirely dependent upon the sympathy and support of specific school administrators.

Although a major shift in attitudes towards female self-defence training is required — both within and beyond the women's movement — this is happening only slowly. As the collective which runs the Montreal Assault Prevention Centre

observed recently, many of the people currently addressing the question of violence against women continue to overlook the need for preventative strategies.

Too much of our time and energy is still spent arguing with panel and conference organizers in and out of feminist settings, about the need. The recent conference on Women and Mental Health, held in Banff this past spring, is one example of an important



feminist event that excluded any discussion or presentation of assault prevention issues.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, even when the value of preventive measures is recognized, the concept of female self-defence training is often neglected. The federal government's *The War Against Women*<sup>3</sup> report, released in June 1991, was drawn up after consultation with 79 individuals representing 38 organizations — all of whom are deeply concerned about violence against women. While two of the report's 25 recommendations specifically address the educational system, female self-defence training isn't mentioned once in the entire text.

The report calls for media literacy courses to become a standard part of our national educational system. It's hoped that such courses will encourage students to critically assess media images which appear to legitimize the use of violence. The report also suggests that universal violence prevention training be provided in our schools. Such training would attempt to counteract violent behaviour patterns and encourage non-violent conflict resolution.

These are sound, sensible recommendations which deserve our support. However, while the authors pay much needed attention to the issue of male responsibility for violence against women, why have they overlooked another significant part of the equation? Increasing the ability of high risk groups to resist infection is surely an integral part of limiting the impact of any disease. This should especially be the case in a situation where it may take decades or even generations for the virus itself to be eradicated.

Even supposing that, in conjunction with media literacy training, non-violence courses reduced aggressive male behaviour by an amazing fifty per cent in a single generation — what would protect women from the men for whom the conditioning didn't work, from assailants who went through the educational system prior to such programs, or attackers who received their schooling elsewhere?

As much as we'd rather not think about it, we are often on our own when our safety is threatened. What if the telephone's been pulled out of the wall?

What if we live in those areas now being served by the 112 Ontario Provincial Police detachments which, due to budget constraints, no longer have officers on duty twenty-four hours a day? Whether our assail-

ant is our partner or a stranger who's just broken into our home, according to *The Globe and Mail*<sup>4</sup> it could take an hour for the nearest law enforcement officer to respond to our call.

There are very few sure things in life. Offering female self-defence training in

school won't provide any guarantees. But it can't help but increase the odds in our favour.

Courses like Wen-Do force us to confront the possibility of becoming a victim of violence. They stress awareness and avoidance as the first line of defence and urge us to trust our gut instinct when things start to feel weird. They identify the most vulnerable parts of the human anatomy and let us know that we are more than capable of inflicting minor to serious injuries in order to give ourselves time to escape. Most importantly perhaps, they assure us that we are worth defending — that we have a moral as well as a legal right to ensure our own safety, and that we are never expected to tolerate physical abuse.

A reasonably sustained, universal self-defence training program has the potential to change lives as well as perceptions. If it was common knowledge that a significant portion of the female population had received such instruction, women wouldn't be considered such easy targets anymore. And who knows? Our bodies might very well react instinctively — even if the person threatening us was someone we knew and loved.

As *The War on Women* points out, there aren't nearly enough rape crisis centres or battered women's shelters. Particularly in these tough economic times, funding is limited. Although it's easy to say that the money should be re-directed from somewhere else, three NDP provincial governments are currently discovering that there are more good causes than there is money.

Perhaps even more heartbreaking, shelters are beginning to report second generation clients. Women who, as children, fled with their abused mothers are now themselves requiring sanctuary. It is hard to escape the feeling that our best efforts continue to miss the mark by a long shot.

Female self-defence training in junior and senior high school should become a primary goal of the Canadian women's movement. If wisely administered, such instruction need not disrupt current educational curriculums significantly and, over the long term, should contribute relatively little strain to school board budgets. Setting up such a program will require some investment, to be sure. But once

every newly-graduated health and physical education teacher knows how to teach these skills, costs should be minimal.

Nearly ten years ago, I took the basic Wen-Do course for the first time. Near the end of the last class, while other students volunteered to come forward and break a one-inch-thick piece of wood with their hand, all my public school insecurities came flooding back. Yes, I was willing to admit that other people could do this sort of thing — but not me, the klutz.

In truth, I had no problem at all. I broke my board in half — as did everyone else. When the instructor then told us that fracturing someone's collarbone requires only a third as much strength, I began to believe that I really *could* take care of myself.

But I remember being angry at the time, as well. Even though this kind of training was so simple and straightforward, I'd had to make a special effort to seek it out. Because, even though I'd regularly found myself fearing for my personal safety, an educational system which endeavored to equip me with the skills necessary to lead a full, productive life hadn't prepared me for this. And because, even though there'd been ample opportunity, I'd been taught nothing half as valuable in physical education classes over the years.

Every time I read about another woman found strangled, stabbed or beaten to death this anger returns. We could have at least given her a fighting chance. It might have been enough to tip the balance and save her life.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Carolyne F. Swift for the public health disease prevention analogy. See "The Prevention of Rape" in *Rape and Sexual Assault, A Research Handbook*, Anne Wolbert Burgess, editor. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1985, pp. 413-426.

<sup>2</sup> Montreal Assault Prevention Centre, "One of a Kind" in *Healthsharing*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Summer 1991, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, Social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women, the *War Against Women*, Barbara Greene, MP, Chair. Ottawa: Queen's Printer for Canada, June 1991.

<sup>4</sup> "Fiscal crisis turns OPP into Ontario's Part-time Police," *The Globe and Mail*, February 3, 1992, pp. A1, A3.

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## HEATHER CADSBY The girls of the fifties

We thought our thighs were too fat  
our hair too curly, and our  
mothers boring.  
We learned how to iron  
and polish silver.  
Our bathing suits were one-piece  
and our skirts were *ballerina*.  
We didn't like Debbie Reynolds  
our sisters, or all-girl summer  
camps.

The boys of the fifties  
wore ties to the drive-in  
gave us their school rings, went  
steady.  
They taught us to jive and sang  
dirty songs  
they thought we didn't get.  
We wore *fire 'n ice* lipstick  
and white underpants.  
We were the last of the virgins.  
Fabulous.  
We knew everything.

## Lytton Strachey and Dora Carrington: The gender equity poem

In the beginning she was twenty-two  
and he was an old maid of a man.  
She was a boy  
and he was a mother in a shawl.  
He drooped when he stood up  
sagged when he sat down  
and dragged his daddy-long-legs  
from room to room.  
She had a strange enchanting strength  
and other men crazy for her.  
He was alone, proud, and given to  
fevers.  
In the beginning they talked  
and watched each other.  
She was used to a fiery man.  
So was he.