Gloves Off: Women’s Self-Defense

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As women achieved greater social and political equality, educational and professional opportunities expanded, drawing women more visibly into the public realm. Countless stories about the physical assault and killings of women dominated the headlines in American cities in the early twentieth century, feeding anxiety about women's increasing presence on the streets. The verbal harassment and physical assaults women faced — and especially the public reaction to these incidents — reflected larger cultural anxieties about shifting gender roles. Women were told they were to blame because they did not belong in public spaces. They were told to go back home, to be silent, or, in the very least, to try to remain invisible if they must be out in public. But women like Berger refused to go home, to be silent, or to be invisible. She refused to be a victim.

The man who attacked Berger grabbed her around the neck from behind and dragged her to the ground. He sat on top of her, gripping her throat with one hand and using his other hand to cover her mouth to prevent her from screaming. Berger was unsure whether his intention was to rob, rape, or kill her, but she determined she had to act. Waiting for her opportunity, she grabbed his arm and sent him flying through the air with a jiu-jitsu move. He landed on his back, and she stood up to find that he was again coming at her. Once again she used her self-defense skills to put him on the ground. Then she ran to report the incident to the police.

When asked by incredulous law enforcement officers and reporters how she successfully escaped the attacker, Berger demonstrated the techniques she learned in a jiu-jitsu class in New York City. She told reporters she believed all women should learn self-defense, because women had the ability and the right to defend themselves. Berger volunteered to teach any woman who desired to learn. Many women took her advice and enrolled in classes to learn the art of self-defense.

Boxing and jiu-jitsu classes such as the one Berger offered to teach were growing in popularity among all sexes in the early 1900s. The physical culture movement contributed to the trend by promoting a national commitment to fitness and encouraging people to take their physical health seriously through athletic training. But women were especially motivated to take up self-defense after reading stories like Berger’s. Women took boxing and jiu-jitsu classes at colleges, gymnasiums, and women’s clubs. Others hired private instructors to teach them how to punch, strike, and otherwise dissuade an attacker.
These women most likely did not envision themselves as the founders of the modern women’s self-defense movement. They also may not have consciously realized they were combatants in a larger battle for women’s political and social freedom. Most women signed up for self-defense courses with the intention of improving their health or learning some techniques to protect themselves on the streets. But, gradually, through the course of their self-defense training, they developed a sense of physical and personal empowerment that transformed their thinking about themselves, about their abilities, and about their rights as human beings.

Gender role stereotypes in the late nineteenth century primarily depicted women as passive and weak, incapable of participating in any type of strenuous activity beyond walking or some other form of mild exercise. Women increasingly pushed those limits by engaging in much more rigorous activities such as hiking, cycling, and weight training as well as team sports including tennis, basketball, and field hockey. At women’s colleges, instructors insisted on the importance of not only educating the mind but in promoting the health of young women. Yet, certain types of sport were still considered perhaps too rigorous for women. The women who began training in boxing and jiu-jitsu during this era were challenging the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior.

Although critics loudly voiced their objections to women studying the “manly art” of self-defense, few could object to the benefits of boxing and jiu-jitsu training for women who wished to learn to protect themselves on the street. As long as self-defense training was framed as a way of protecting women from threats posed by other men, objections to women’s self-defense training mostly faded away. The construction of black men and foreigners as the primary perpetrators of violence against women fed into nativist and racialized views that tended to deflect blame for all violence against women to immigrants and men of color. Although the statistical reality was that most of the violence against women on the street was committed by native-born white men, the fear of the immigrant, nonwhite attacker served as a scapegoat.

The specter of the dangerous stranger was also useful in marketing women’s self-defense even as feminists pointed to a larger truth that women were most commonly victimized not
by strangers on the street but by men they knew, and often in their own homes. Yet, the caricature of the sinister stranger preying on innocent women, coupled with the publication of stories such as Berger’s that highlighted real-life cases, motivated women to join self-defense classes and generally silenced opposition about women’s self-defense.

Other critics feared women’s bodies would become masculinized through their training in boxing and jiu-jitsu. This concern hid a larger fear that if women felt they were the equal of men, they would begin to demand other forms of social and political equality. This fear was not entirely unfounded. Increasingly, women recognized their own physical power through self-defense training. Physical empowerment often did lead to a sense of political empowerment and demands for greater equality. English suffragists recognized the political and physical connection, often promoting athletics and self-defense as an essential part of the training for the fight for political equality that lay before them. Women rejected the sexist notion that men were their natural protector and pointed out a more radical truth: The men who committed violence against women were often the same men that women were told they should look to for protection.

Self-defense training helped women recognize they had the ability and indeed the right to protect themselves. This realization was powerfully transforming. In learning to punch and strike, women gained a sense of their own physical strength. Women cast off notions of feminine weakness and embraced a new empowered vision of themselves as individuals worthy of their rights as citizens and as human beings.