Hacking systems of oppression and protecting our vital strengths:

a feminist framework for self-defense

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

It was as a martial arts practitioner that I first learnt the dark irony of violence. It very rarely looks like an anonymous attacker or a dark alleyway. It also doesn't go around seeking a randomised, weak and vulnerable-looking target either. Rather, it shows up as an exercise of power by a mentor we respect, or by an intimate partner we love. It shows up in our schools, gym classes and news feeds - the very places supposedly there to empower us. It shows up in our private messaging platforms, our family gatherings and our bedrooms – the very places we seek safety through intimacy and belonging. And it happens to us. All of us. Not because we show weakness. But because we show strength.

The exploration of this topic started when I came to notice the prevalence of sexual violence against female martial arts athletes. We were people who had, in excess, the 'self-defense' techniques and capabilities necessary to prevent an attack, and yet still, fell victim. I have also seen among the most tech-savvy of my colleagues be attacked in their spaces of community online. Those who take up space in our workspaces through the loudness of their voices were the most likely silenced, and those with the deepest ancestral connection to their lands, denied ownership. While this research initially set out to explore responses to imminent violence against our physical and digital bodies, I quickly realised that the violence against us targets our bodies as a continuum across multiple dimensions of existence and expression. This suggests that an effective framework for self-defense requires more than combat techniques and safety tools. But what could that look like?

The concepts discussed in this framework are drawn from the knowledge, experiences and desires of eight physical and digital self-defense practitioners and trainers from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Pacific; a physical workshop with seven local trainers, communications practitioners and human rights defenders in Durban, South Africa; and an online workshop with six feminist activists from the internet. It also draws on the resolutions, dialogues, theories and principles from feminist manifestos, activist handbooks, training manuals, opinion pieces, journal articles and organisational reports published from the global South[1] and international coalitions.

This paper is an invitation to step barefoot onto the mat, and grapple with the concepts discussed within these pages alongside me. It is a playful experiment about the power of politicising self-defense practice, and applying a self-defense feminist framework to understanding violence as a continuum between contested territories, and the totality of our bodies it affects.

'Situating, locating. Feminist self-defense as political strategy' aims to locate this framework for self-defense in feminist prevention strategies against gender-based violence, where the real lived experiences, needs and desires of real people remain at the centre of this work. It acknowledges that women, non-binary, gender non-conforming and gender diverse people who are resisting patriarchal societal norms are especially targeted for their identity and activism, and so any response for prevention of our harm requires a politicised and gendered approach.

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[1] While the 'global South' is a term that has received criticism in recent years, I choose to use this term as claimed by Deirdre Byrne and Z'etoile Imma in Why 'Southern feminisms'? where they articulate the term as referring to geographical locations and peoples negatively impacted by contemporary capitalist globalisation. For them, the use of the term, 'global South', is a means of enacting 'non-colonising solidarity across borders,' and a deliberate attempt to 'move the centre' of our thinking away from, and disinvest in, the hegemonic knowledges of the 'European metropole' and colonial North America, which have led to the exclusion of knowledges held in other parts of the world. For further reading: Byrne, Deirdre and Imma, Z'etoile (2019) Why 'Southern Feminisms'? Agenda. 33(3).

Next we will analyse what a feminist definition of self-defense requires, sharing perspectives and practices that arose from the experiences of feminist trainers working in the global South. We then consider how feminist notions of self-defense are coded into trainings and workshops, and articulate the mechanisms trainers adopt in order for learning spaces to embody the very 'conditions of possibility'[2] we fight for in our daily lives.

In order to defend ourselves effectively, we must know the violence we are up against. 'Knowing our battlefields,' invites us to identify the contested territories we explore and inhabit, while considering their contested conditions as personal, political, everchanging and interconnected. This section also exposes the reality that these battlefields are not just external to us – our internalisation of systems of violence and oppression mean that we hold the capacity to inflict violence against ourselves too.

A feminist approach to self-defense hacks the cis-hetero-colonial separation, exploitation and clinicalisation of our bodies and senses of self, as favoured territories for exercises of harm and control within our patriarchal contexts. In 'Dismantling the dichotomies of the body,' we interrogate the binaries we are expected to embody and call for a more expansive understanding of the self as multi-dimensional, personal and collective.

Finally, we reflect on the expansiveness of what it means to be alive: not as a state of being alone, but as an expression of our truths, fully possible in the world free from violence we pursue and endeavour to realise. Our vital strengths – the very resources that keep us alive – are essential to this realisation and must be protected as part of our practice of self and collective defense.

[2] Lab de Interconectividades (2017) Febrero de Autodefensas Hackfeministas en la CDMX! Date accessed: 26 October 2020. https://lab-interconectividades.net/taller-atdfhkfm-oax/ (translated from Spanish using Deepl.com)

Situating, locating. Feminist self–defense as political strategy.

This framework locates self-defense within the spectrum of feminist strategies to prevent gender-based violence. At its foundation, it incorporates an intersectional gender-power analysis,[3] is accountable to women, girls and trans*[4] people, integrates a practice and politics of care,[5] and fosters activism. Secondly, it is situated politically on the shoulders of women and trans* people who came before us, whose rich legacies of activism and leadership have had to resist systematic erasure in patriarchal accounts of history. It is these legacies that have made this work possible: by forging the creation of a more enabling environment for us to live out, build and fight for our visions of a more just world, which we must believe is possible.

Self-defense as strategy.

Gender-based violence and violence against women have been defined by various multilateral agreements and protocols around the world. Feminist frameworks for prevention politicise these definitions, by placing "patriarchal social relations, structures and systems, which are embedded in other oppressive and exploitative structures" at the centre of their analysis.[6] What this means for our understanding of self-defense within these strategies is that *self-defense is a response to attacks that are experientially intersectional, and systemic in nature.*

Gender-based violence incorporates "any act or conduct, based on gender,"[7] which "cause or attempt to cause physical, sexual, psychological and economic harm, including the threat to undertake such acts,"[8] whether "in the public or private sphere;"[9] or "to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivations of fundamental freedoms."[10] These acts of violence "can be committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs),"[11] physical contact, verbal communication, or financial, legal or algorithmic infrastructure and resources.

The impact of these forms of violence against women, girls and trans* persons are alarming and far-reaching. They deny our access to fundamental freedoms, restrict our personal development and movement and usurp our right to self-determination.[12] As both the cause and effect of continued injustice and the perpetuation of patriarchal structures of oppression, it is important to note that these acts of violence are not arbitrary. Violence is a strategically exercised tactic used to harm, silence and control us. Furthermore, *the body is a favoured territory for the exercise of violence.*[13] Through the body, the patriarchal order seeks to control our sexuality and our reproductivity, limit our access to care, define our desires and our permitted pleasures, and restrict our movement. Self-defense concerns itself with the protection of our bodies across their spectrum of place, existence and expression.

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[3] African Women's Development Forum (2019) Evidence-based prevention of violence against women: Building African Feminist Momentum. Date accessed: 26 October 2020. https://awdf.org/evidence-based-prevention-of-violence-against-women-convening-report-building-african-feminist-momentum/

[4] For the purposes of this paper, I use the term trans* to include gender non-conforming, non-binary, gender diverse and other counter normative gender identities, acknowledging the continuum of gender identities that exist in as many diversities as there are people in the world.

[5] FTX: Safety Reboot (2019) Date accessed: 30 October 2020. https://ftxreboot.wiki.apc.org/index.php/Main_Page

[6] African Feminist Forum (2007) Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists. Date accessed: 26 October 2020. https://awdf.org/the-african-feminist-charter/

[7] Belem do Para Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women

[8] Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa

[9] See footnote 7. [10] See footnote 8.

[11] Association for Progressive Communications (2017) From Impunity to Justice. Date accessed: 26 October 2020. https://web.archive.org/web/20170619195028/http://www.genderit.org/onlinevaw/

[12] Artemisa, Elige and CREA (2008) Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists. Date accessed: 14 September 2020.

[13] Ibid.

A feminist approach also acknowledges that there are many social, economic, cultural and geographical factors that affect our experiences of violence. This is relevant to self-defense practice, because what one person considers violence may not be violence to another. Similarly, what is considered an expression of strength to one, might not be an expression of strength to another.[14] Words have different energies and meanings across cultures and languages.[15] Since violence is an exercise of power, and that power is legitimised by oppressive systems such as patriarchy and its intersections, there are also certain types of violence that some of us will never have to face because of our privilege, while for others, that same violence forms part of their everyday lives.

Lastly, an intersectional feminist application to self-defense must further acknowledge that our perpetrators are not born in a vacuum.[16] Many self-defense workshops problematically depict perpetrators as anonymous, 'bad' people, erasing their humanity to justify an aggressive reaction against their harmful actions towards us. But our attackers are brothers, fathers and uncles;[17] they are the women in our lives wanting to protect their family values;[18] they are colleagues and friends in our activist movements.[19] Our emotional ties to those that harm us make self-defense as practice a complex, personal and challenging endeavour, but all the more necessary when we acknowledge how these emotional ties can compound the harm inflicted on us, and exacerbate trauma.

the body is a favoured territory for the exercise of violence

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14 Cynthia El Khoury (Lebanon). 21 September 2020. Personal communication.
15 Toni Giselle Stuart (South Africa). 5 October 2020. Workshop conversation.
16 See footnote 14.
17 Nomzamo Mji (South Africa). 17 October 2020. (Post)workshop conversation.
18 Lina Khalifeh (Jordan). 14 September 2020. Personal communication.
19 Nozipho Mthembu (South Africa) 17 October 2020. Workshop conversation.

Self-defense as political.

The evolution of self- and collective defense systems today can be credited to the countless generations of women and trans* people who came before us. Their impact in our online, material, geopolitical, personal and collective spaces, however, heightened their risk to attack. ***Self- and collective defense is a means of protecting our collective victories, which depend not only on our survival, but on our capacity to live full lives.*** Furthermore, the elimination of violence starts with making it a reality for ourselves. Our own self-defense practices keep us connected to the very things we are fighting for.

It is our queen warriors, women and trans* human rights defenders, technologist protagonists and others who have enabled the building and envisioning of the feminist autonomous infrastructure we desire to be the environment for our platforms, lands, bodies and other contested territories. We need to remember, however, that the women and trans* people who influenced history were not invited to lead. Many hacked the misogynist geopolitical algorithms controlling our landscapes by infiltrating anonymously - under the guise of pseudonyms and usernames, the performance of altered gender identities, and even the embodiment of ancestral spirits.

The intergenerational history of feminist movements fighting for the elimination of gender-based violence holds a multiplicity of long, medium and short-term strategies. At the same time, it is in fighting against this violence that women and trans* activists often come face to face with it, sometimes on a daily basis.

Defending ourselves against imminent violence creates the conditions for us to continue our work, but also is the work in and of itself.

The effective elimination of violence requires us to acknowledge that systems of oppression not only manifest as exercises of power by others against us, but that we also embody the very oppressive systems we are trying to dismantle. The struggle to eliminate violence in all its manifestations therefore must start with the belief that this work starts with ourselves.[20] A commitment to the practice of feminist self-defense is a commitment to our individual and collective survival: to the life of each and every one of us.[21]

Lastly, in order for us as activists to continue fighting for a world free from violence for women, girls and trans* people, we must believe that such a world is a tangible possibility. ***We locate ourselves, therefore, as protagonists within the moments that have altered history – which include the moments of defending our individual and collective survival*** – understanding that this is a location we have been historically denied.[23]

Self- and collective defense is a means of protecting our collective victories, which depend not only on our survival, but on our capacity to live full lives

[20] Artemisa, Elige and CREA (2008) Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists. Date accessed: 14 September 2020. https://creaworld.org/publications/self-care-and-self-defence-manual-feminist-activists-2008-0

[21] Liliana Zaragoza Cano and Anna Akhmatova (2018) Manifiesto Por Algoritmias Hackfeministas. Date accessed: 26 October 2020. https://www.genderit.org/es/articles/edicion-especial-manifiesto-por-algoritmias-hackfeministas (translated from Spanish using Deepl.com)

[22] African Women's Development Forum (2019) Evidence-based prevention of violence against women: Building African Feminist Momentum. Date accessed: 26 October 2020. https://awdf.org/evidence-based-prevention-of-violence-against-women-convening-report-building-african-feminist-momentum/

[23] Maca Orellana Caperochipi (Chile). 22 October 2020. Personal communication. (translated from Spanish using Deepl.com)

So, what is feminist self-defense?

Self-defense is a system of techniques and tools that can be used to mitigate harm when we are the target of violence. Through a feminist lens, it is a voluntary and conscious, personal and collective action that involves setting personal boundaries, and acknowledging and adopting the resources available to us to prevent being harmed.[24] The practice of self-defense incorporates an awareness of our environments and of ourselves, avoidance of harm in relation to the boundaries we set, and proactively attending to our imminent needs in order to live more autonomously if we so choose – free from violence.[25]

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[24] This definition is an adaptation from definitions found in Artemisa, Elige and CREA (2008) Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists (see footnote 9), integrating understandings expressed from interviewed trainers, and from participants of a physical workshop held in Durban, South Africa, on 17 October 2020.

[25] Awareness, Avoidance and Action is a framework for self-defense training developed by Tamryn Currin (South Africa) and Bunmi Ojewole (South Africa).

A system

Self-defense is a system, because the techniques, tools and other resources we use are inter-connected. One affects the effectiveness of the other. Our very ownership of a mobile device (resource 1), for example, relies on our digital literacy, physical ability and mental wellbeing (resource 2-4) to send a message, make a phone call or write a post (resources 5-7) to access members of our support network (resource 8) to ask for help (resource 9). The interplay of our posture, tone of voice and intentional breath (resources 1-3), as another example, can influence and even guide the trajectory of a potentially harmful confrontation.

Voluntary and conscious

The notion that self-defense is a voluntary and conscious action pushes back against patriarchal projections of women and trans* people as weak, helpless, irrational, uninformed, or otherwise incapable of knowing what is best for us or of managing our own lives. The voluntary and conscious nature of self-defense relies on our understanding that women and trans* people have agency and capacity.

Agency is intricately linked to our acknowledgement that effective self-defense requires us to familiarise ourselves with the tools, techniques and resources we choose to have available to us. It also invites us to give ourselves permission to be curious in discovering more about them. Lina Khalifeh (Jordan), Taekwondo

champion and founder of SheFighter,[26] noted that we train self-defense techniques so that we don't have to use them.[27] Also pointing to the agency that acquired knowledge and skill give us, Jenny Radloff (South Africa), one of the writers of the FTX: Safety Reboot[28] - a feminist training curriculum on digital safety - also explained, "you have so much more agency if you understand encryption, or if you commit to using open source software".[29] Having knowledge of the techniques and tools we have available to us gives us agency in deciding whether we are going to use them or not. It is when we do not have the knowledge of how to use those resources that our agency is undermined.

Secondly, it is our belief in our capacity to defend ourselves that enables our defense to be effective. *A feminist approach to self-defense involves connecting to a deep, personal and collective belief that the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence is possible, and that our actions taken to fight against violence contributes to that elimination.* A fundamental part of Lina's (Jordan) self-defense classes, for example, intentionally involves building the confidence of participants to dismantle their own conditioned beliefs that women "cannot do the things that men can do".[30] We engage in self-defense as a practice, because there is "no quick fix" to protecting ourselves against violence.[31] It requires us to hack into our own embodied memory and belief systems in order to alter our behaviours, and make decisions that are informed by our innate capacity to defend ourselves.

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[26] https://www.shefighter.com/
[27] Lina Khalifeh (Jordan). 14 September 2020. Personal communication.
[28] https://ftxreboot.wiki.apc.org/index.php/Main_Page
[29] Jenny Radloff (South Africa). 1 September 2020. Personal communication.
[30] Lina Khalifeh (Jordan). 14 September 2020. Personal communication.
[31] Jenny Radloff (South Africa). 1 September 2020. Personal communication.

Personal and collective

It was during a workshop with local activists in Durban, South Africa,[32] that we started to dismantle the dichotomy of the individual and collective self. As we grappled with different definitions of self-defense, a notion that emerged repeatedly from activists in the room was that self-defense is also about protecting others. This resonates with the reality faced by indigenous women human rights defenders, for example, whose struggle for autonomy within their communities is intertwined with the struggle for autonomy of the communities themselves.[33] Similarly, Lab de Interconectividades, an experimental hackfeminist space, integrates 'hackfeminist self-defense' into their work to complement strategies of collective struggle and care.[34]

As we embody, through our daily practices and our work, the political responsibility that comes with the belief that gender-based violence is preventable, we start to realise that this work starts with us. It starts with us, because we have to make the decision that gender-based violence stops with us. We cannot effectively engage in the defense of others, if we are not also intentional about engaging in the practice of defending ourselves.

Setting personal boundaries

Setting boundaries requires an awareness both of ourselves and of our environment. Through self-awareness, we are able to sense what and who makes us feel uncomfortable. It also helps us to reflect on what violence is to us, and where we draw the line with how we want to be treated by others. Being aware of our immediate environments – the places and spaces we explore and inhabit – helps us to take stock of what dangers we may face. It also helps us identify the resources we would have available to us in those

spaces, should we need to defend ourselves. *Having clearly articulated boundaries enables us to detect danger from further away,*[35] *and make decisions to minimise any potential risk.*

In a recent workshop,[36] one participant described the gaslighting effect an intimate partner's expectations of her behaviour had on her. She was called crazy when she acted confidently, and accused of being irrational when she acted submissively. It was when she realised that there was not something wrong with her, but with her partner, that she was able to create personal boundaries and affirm her life choices. Cynthia El Khoury (Lebanon), community health and trauma resolution practitioner and Aikido practitioner, further explained that in Aikido, if you can prevent contact with someone that wants to harm you, that is Aikido. *Protecting yourself is not only in the fighting back, but in not giving the space to create it.*[37]

Harnessing our resources

While it is undeniable that some have more resources than others, and that a lack of resources places certain people and communities at a far greater risk than others, self-defense is less about having resources than it is about being resourceful. We have resources within us and around us, and their effectiveness depends on our awareness of them and the extent of our knowledge of how to use them. This by no means suggests that we are in any way ever to blame should we find ourselves in a situation where we are unable to ward off an attack. The exercise of violence against anyone is never justified, and it is not our fault that exposure to violence is a part of our realities. Rather, while there may be many things in a moment of imminent violence that we will have absolutely no control over, *self-defense is an act of taking responsibility for what we can control.*

[32] Workshop titled, Self-defense for activists: a feminist approach. 17 October 2020. Durban, South Africa.

[33] Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) (2014) Our right to safety: Women human rights defenders' holistic approach to protection. Date accessed: 1 October 2020. https://www.awid.org/publications/our-right-safety-women-human-rights-defenders-holistic-approach-protection

[34] For more information on the concept of hackfeminist self-defense, see Lab de Interconectividades (2016) Autodefensas Hackfeministas. Date accessed: 28 September 2020. https://lab-interconectividades.net/autodefensas-hackfeministas/ (translated from Spanish using Deepl.com)

[35] Robyn Taylor (South Africa). 17 September 2020. Personal communication.

[36] Workshop titled, Self-defense for activists: a feminist approach. 17 October 2020. Durban, South Africa.

[37] Cynthia El Khoury (Lebanon). 21 September 2020. Personal communication.

Coding feminist self–defense into our trainings.

"We use hackfeminist self-defence practices to develop conditions of possibility in our daily struggles"

– Lab de Interconectividades, Mexico[38]

Much of the work currently being done in the form of feminist physical and digital self-defense and safety trainings has firstly emerged as a resistance to normative models of such training. These normative models are often depoliticised, contextually isolated, and taught from the standpoint that the internet, the streets and our bodies are neutral territories. Secondly, far from teaching self-defense as merely reactive, feminist trainers are using trainings as opportunities for exchange, healing, creativity, strengthening and community building: actively creating the enabling environment free from violence they desire. Mechanisms for holding space include ensuring contextual relevance, centering lived realities, and applying a politics and practice of care.

Creating an enabling environment

Some trainers that were interviewed deliberately choose not to use the term 'self-defense' or 'digital safety' as an isolated descriptor of what they teach in order to disassociate with normative models of training. Alternative terms included 'hackfeminist self-defense',[39] 'empowerment'[40] and 'feminist self-defense'.[41] These alternative descriptors speak to shifting the concept of self-defense as a reaction to an isolated attack, to rather, a system of actions that is proactive: both a response to imminent needs, and a manifestation in and of itself of the enabling environment we desire.

For Lina (Jordan), creating an enabling environment requires the protection of its energy. She has often had to kick parents out of her self-defense studio who have come to watch, and who publicly break down the self-esteem of their daughters attending the class.[42] For Nomzamo Mji (South Africa), yoga practitioner and co-founder of The Toolbox,[43] our inner self is another dimension of the enabling environment we desire. You cannot create a safe space for yourself [outside of you] "if there is a war going on inside of you". Our bodies are "the first safe space we have to create".[44]

The push back against the notion of self-defense as merely a reaction resonates with the perspectives of women human rights defenders regarding their safety. They highlight the limitations of the notion of 'security', which is often understood as protection from violence. In other words, violence must be present before security measures are taken.[45] In contrast, women human rights defenders emphasise their need for an enabling environment:[46] one that acknowledges the legitimacy of their work, and is supported by legal, financial, technological and embodied emotional, mental and spiritual infrastructures that sustain it.

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[38] Lab de Interconectividades (2017) Febrero de Autodefensas Hackfeministas en la CDMX! Date accessed: 26 October 2020. https://lab-interconectividades.net/taller-atdfhkfm-oax/ (translated from Spanish using Deepl.com)

[39] Ibid.

[40] Lina Khalifeh (Jordan). 14 September 2020. Personal communication. Lina prefers to refer to her place of training as 'the empowerment zone' rather than a self-defense studio.

[41] Maca Orellana Caperochipi (Chile). 22 October 2020. Personal communication. (translated from Spanish using Deepl.com). In the interview, Maca explicitly clarified that it is not self-defense that she teaches, but 'feminist self-defense'.

[42] See footnote 40.

[43] http://thetoolbox260.com/

[44] Nomzamo Mji (South Africa). 17 October 2020. Workshop conversation.

[45] In 2009, Hina Jilani, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, expressed her concern of how the protection of human rights defenders is only taken seriously by states when there is international pressure. See Jilani, Hina (2009) Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the situation of human rights defenders: Addendum: Mission to Guatemala. Paragraph 68. Date accessed: 31 October 2020. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/648708?ln=en

[46] AWID (2014) Our right to safety: Women human rights defenders' holistic approach to protection. Date accessed: 1 October 2020. https://www.awid.org/publications/our-right-safety-women-human-rights-defenders-holistic-approach-protection

Contextual relevance

Moments of confrontation in which we need to protect ourselves from harm do not happen in parallel dimensions separate from our realities. Confrontations occur in varying forms and intensities, and are a part of our daily lives. Normative models of training often frame attacks as isolated scenarios that occur arbitrarily and unordinarily. They also start and stop at teaching techniques and tools, which participants of those workshops are expected to integrate into their work and life.[47] Feminist trainings use lived experiences and participants' needs as the starting point of the knowledge building process, into which tools and techniques must adapt and integrate.

When we talk about safety within the context of spaces people already occupy, training sessions are immediately more inclusive, because it addresses immediate needs. Smita Vanniyar (India), a digital safety trainer, used the example of working with members of LGBTQ communities, who often use dating apps to find friendships and community. "These are what we consider our safe spaces", but mainstream safety advice is to remove ourselves from these spaces.[48] When we do so, we cut ourselves off from connection, community and pleasure. When speaking about the right of youth to access and explore the internet, one participant of the recently-held 'Making a Feminist Internet in a Digital Age in Africa' convening, explained, "we cannot tell our kids to stop sexting, but we can teach them how to sext better".[49]

Furthermore, *our contexts are a messy amalgamation of resources, desires, places and identities. Violence is a continuum across these aspects of our lives.* However, these remain isolated in normative models of training. In physical self-defense workshops, we learn about bodily contact and the dangers of the street. In digital self-defense workshops, we learn about digital applications and security software and the dangers of the internet. But, all too often, a harmful attack can start in a physical realm and escalate online. It can start in our online spaces and escalate offline. And beyond these two dichotomies, we know that *we inhabit a multiverse of spatial dimensions, none of which are neutral, all of which can expose us to harm, and all of which can harbour places of safety.* A contextually relevant approach to self-defense understands intricately the pervasiveness of the violence we face, and identifies the resources available to us for when we need them.

From tools and techniques to lived realities

Feminist trainers that were interviewed consistently acknowledged that there are broader aspects of women and trans* people's realities that keep us exposed to violence. As we endeavour to set limits for the kinds of interactions we would like to have with people in our lives, we need the autonomy to be able to do so.[50] Women in Martial Arts (Kiribati), a feminist self-defense collective, have integrated into their training programme a concept they call 'Self Reliance,' that teaches young women and girls entrepreneurial skills and how to manage money.[51] Two collectives in Mexico, Lab de Interconectividades and Comando Colibrí, hold collaborative workshops to support a cross-pollination of self-defense strategies for armouring the digital, physical and psychological continuum of our bodies.[52]

The material, psychological and structural constraints that prevent women and trans* people from asserting their boundaries requires us to understand that *addressing imminent violence requires addressing imminent needs.*

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[47] Smita Vanniyar. 15 September 2020. Workshop conversation.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Meeting participant (Kenya). 28 October 2019. Making a feminist internet in a digital age in Africa convening.
[50] Artemisa, Elige and CREA (2008) Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists. Date accessed: 14 September 2020. https://creaworld.org/publications/self-care-and-self-defence-manual-feminist-activists-2008-0
[51] Daisy Teitinimatang Betero (Kiribati). 1 October 2020. Personal communication.
[52] Lab de Interconectividades (2017) Febrero de Autodefensas Hackfeministas en la CDMX! Date accessed: 26 October 2020. https://lab-interconectividades.net/taller-atdfhkfm-oax/ *(translated from Spanish using Deepl.com)*

A politics and practice of care

Care and attention to participant safety is a priority for feminist trainers of self-defense. Some trainers deliberately integrate a trauma-informed approach to their trainings, acknowledging that practising certain techniques or discussing certain scenarios can trigger or re-traumatise a person.[53] Cynthia (Lebanon) emphasised the importance of taking the time to understand who is with us in the class. "How do we sustain the trust and self-confidence that has [previously] been taken away from us?"[54]

Meaningful consent is also an integral aspect to the practice of care. Smita (India) differentiates this to 'technical consent,' saying that consent is "not just the yes, but creating the space for the no".[55] Space for the 'no' is often created by giving repeated opportunities throughout a workshop for participants to disengage if they so choose. Leria Francois (South Africa), a kickboxer and self-defense trainer, explained how she has "safety reminders" throughout a class, letting participants know they can stop at any time, and that there is no pressure to continue doing something that makes them feel uncomfortable.[56] Similarly, in instances where participants are sharing their stories, it is crucial to create the space for participants to come back to you, even after the event, to say they do not want their stories told publicly or published.[57]

Other methodologies include creating an environment where participants feel free to express themselves and also be seen. Lina (Jordan) intentionally holds women-only classes, and does not allow spectators that are men, in order for participants to feel comfortable.[58] Maca Orellana Caperochipi (Chile) works with Chilean Sign Language interpreters and ensures that the activities she facilitates are accessible and inclusive of differing abilities.[59] Numerous trainers also deliberately bring in an element of fun into their work, even using the felt experience of fun as an indicator of the sense of safety in the room. As Jenny (South Africa) explained, playing games such as roleplay is critical, because it allows people to make mistakes.[60] When we embody different characters other than our own, the mistakes we make are recognised as learnings, as opposed to something for which we can be judged.

Lastly, a practice and politics of care considers the safety and wellbeing of trainers themselves. During a Feminist Tech eXchange (FTX) convening in 2018, many trainers who were present admitted their need for intentional personal and collective care.[61] Facilitating workshops requires us as trainers to be vulnerable in order to connect with others. We often share our stories or examples from our own lives as a way of making what we teach more relatable.[62] We are also regularly exposed to the stories and traumatic experiences of others: "you become a counsellor",[63] and we often blur the lines between our private and professional boundaries to support others. This is because we understand that 'care' – despite the unfortunate widespread depoliticisation of the term – is not a set of techniques, but rather a commitment to connection and authentic relationship.

Trainers identified the necessity of building a strong network of support amongst themselves.[64] "Returning to the collective", talking together, and "giving each other spaces for love", are essential aspects of creating that solidarity.[65]

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[53] Robyn Taylor (South Africa). 17 September 2020. Personal communication. And Cynthia El Khoury (Lebanon). 21 September 2020. Personal communication.

[54] Cynthia El Khoury (Lebanon). 21 September 2020. Personal communication.

[55] Smita Vanniyar (India). 15 September 2020. Workshop conversation.

[56] Leria Francois (South Africa). 17 September 2020.

[57] Smita Vanniyar (India) 15 September 2020. Workshop conversation.

[58] Lina Khalifeh (Jordan). 14 September 2020. Personal communication.

[59] Maca Orellana Caperochipi (Chile). 22 October 2020. Personal communication. *(translated from Spanish using Deepl.com)*

[60] Jenny Radloff (South Africa). 1 September 2020. Personal communication.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Leria Francois (South Africa). 17 September 2020.

[63] Anonymous (Sub-Saharan Africa). 15 September 2020. Personal communication.

[64] Jenny Radloff (South Africa). 1 September 2020. Personal communication.

[65] Maca Orellana Caperochipi (Chile). 22 October 2020. Personal communication. (translated from Spanish using Deepl.com)

Knowing our battlefields

Recognising the different forms of violence we face is the first step in building effective strategies towards combatting them. Different forms of violence are understood and enacted differently across cultures and contexts, and informed by our personal and communities' experiences. While an analysis of the vast number of violent tactics that can be used against us is beyond the scope of this paper, exploring the nature of the environments where they occur can support our understanding of the nuances of violence as a strategic system that operates across the different spaces in which we live and move.

Our homes, online communities, bodies, relationships, cities and other territories are our places of personal growth, self-realisation, creative expression, joy and safety. The term 'battlefields' is intentionally used here, not to negate their capacity to give us life, but to make it explicit. They are our battlefields, because they are not neutral grounds. They are a part of ourselves that we must decisively defend, and their intrinsic connection to our senses of belonging and purpose are precisely why we must claim them as our own. Our battlefields are political, personal, evolving, and increasingly interconnected. While we often think of the environments we embody as being external to us, we also need to acknowledge our psyche and internal body as sites of memory and experienced trauma, which we must defend against violence, too.

Our battlefields are political, and they are personal

The spaces in which we live, work and move are political, because our right, not only to be in them, but to influence and shape them, is a negotiation of power – power that is often exercised against us in the form of violence. A feminist framework to self-defense acknowledges that the personal is political too. When harm is inflicted against us in our own homes by our intimate partners or family members, it does not mean that that violence is accidental or arbitrary, or any less an exercise of power over us to control and restrict our bodies, our choices and our agency.

Lina (Jordan) describes the compounded trauma experienced by young women and girls living in a country with fundamentalist laws, the goals of which are to protect the family unit and the honour of men: "Whatever the woman is suffering, it's not a big deal, as long as they will try to solve the problem in the family," she says, speaking to the structural barriers for women to get legal redress. The abuse these women and girls face are considered private matters, which get subsequently erased by parents who threaten their daughters - even with death - if they speak of the abuse to anyone.[66]

Even in countries with democratic laws, the honour of men is still valued over and above a woman's agency in certain contexts, and we continue to see politics play out in personal spaces. Activist member of a grassroots Mthwalume-based collective called Ordinary People Against Rape (South Africa), Hlengiwe Gasa, describes how her grandmother was emotionally extorted by her grandfather into closing down a successful business selling chickens from home. While he had never had a problem with the business before, he started to resent the fact that she was earning more money than him when he retired, and so started to accuse her of sleeping with her male customers.[67]

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[66] Lina Khalifeh (Jordan). 14 September 2020. Personal communication.
[67] Hlengiwe Gasa (South Africa). 17 October 2020. Workshop conversation.

Our battlefields are changing, and they are interconnected

The territories we seek to claim as ours are also in continuous processes of evolution. As one digital security trainer (Sub-Saharan Africa) suggested, "To know technology is to know that it is constantly changing".[68] Not only are the spaces we inhabit evolving, but they are becoming less distinct as we are able to transcend one battlefield into the next, often embodying multiple spaces at once. As these spaces increasingly evolve and merge, so do the violent tactics against us. This requires us, as defenders of our individual and collective bodies, to remain privy to these changes and be responsive in creating strategies against them.

The increased lack of distinction between spaces becomes apparent when we acknowledge the embodied repercussions violence can have online, or how changes to our digitally-supported geopolitical landscape can impact our access to rights and freedoms. As our personal information becomes increasingly valuable to big companies in the age of artificial intelligence, so are states progressively enforcing their ownership of our personal information, capturing them through numeric classification processes,[69] reducing us to (the commodification of) our data, and deepening the invasiveness of their inquiries about our lives.

The multiple landscapes across which violence can be enacted is exemplified in the case of Shailja Patel, a Kenyan writer, who was sexually assaulted by a colleague at a work-related convening. She was then immediately exposed to secondary violence by the failures of legal infrastructure when local authorities claimed there was 'insufficient evidence' to the case. When she took to her Twitter profile to name her perpetrator, she was further victimised when he laid defamation charges against her, which he subsequently won. The US$87,000 she was required to pay to her perpetrator in damages led her to exile.[70] Her case demonstrates the bodily, interpersonal, professional, digital, legal, economic and geopolitical landscapes in which violence can be enacted against us and compounded.

We witness the devastation of changes to our political environment when misogynist leaders take office. The Trump administration's reinstatement of the 'Global Gag Rule,'[71] for example, has had direct impact on the sustainability and survival of grassroots sexual and reproductive justice organisations across the world, and thus had a direct impact on the women and trans* people they serve. This policy is a tactic of violence against women, enacted in one geopolitical location that directly affects the health of bodies across the world. The change in political, socioeconomic, funding and organisational landscapes has required organisations to reassess their defense strategies against sexual and reproductive violence.[72]

As territories continue to evolve, it becomes increasingly apparent how we exist within and navigate multiple landscapes simultaneously. When we experience an attack on our bodies that occurs online, while scrolling through the notifications of our social media profiles in the comfort of our beds, for example, it can really feel like we are being attacked in our own homes. Jenny (South Africa) describes the embodied experience of insecurity she had receiving an unsolicited phone call on Skype from someone she didn't know, which compelled her immediately to get up and lock all the doors of her house.[73]

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[68] Anonymous (Sub-Saharan Africa). 15 September 2020. Personal communication.

[69] See, for example, Mungai, Christine (2019) Kenya's Huduma: Data commodification and government tyranny. Al Jazeera. Date accessed: 30 October 2020. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/8/6/kenyas-huduma-data-commodification-and-government-tyranny/

[70] For more on the story, see Griffin, Tamerra (2019) She was ordered to pay damages and apologize to the man who allegedly assaulted her – so she left the country. Buzzfeed News. Date accessed: 15 September 2020. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tamerragriffin/shailja-patel-defamation-sexual-assault-kenya-exile

[71] The Global Gag Rule, also known as the Mexico City Policy, prohibits non-governmental organisations outside the United States (U. S.) who receive U.S. global health assistance from providing legal abortion services, including information about safe abortion and referrals, while also barring advocacy for abortion law reform, even if done using an organisation's own funds, or non-U. S. funds.

[72] Hessini, Leila (2019) Women's Groups and Funders Respond to Global Gag Rule. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Date accessed: 20 October 2020.https://ssir.org/articles/entry/womens_groups_and_funders_respond_to_global_gag_rule

[73] Jenny Radloff (South Africa). 1 September 2020. Personal communication.

The battlefields inside ourselves

Because we work, learn and live in environments regulated by systemic and oppressive infrastructures, those very same systems are internalised by us, and manifest in how we relate to others and also ourselves. *A feminist framework to self-defense therefore acknowledges that this work starts with us: by dismantling the expectations placed upon us by the patriarchal social order, noticing how our own senses of purpose are informed by societal expectations, and confronting where we seek validation from others.* This is particularly relevant considering the roles we play as women and trans* people, and especially as activists, too.

For many trainers, one of the greatest challenges their workshop and class participants face is their fear of stepping into an embodiment of strength when they feel it is not appropriate or accepted of them as women or trans* people.[74] They can "lack self-confidence", believing that they cannot defend themselves against other people, including members of their family and those representing the state.[75] [76]

Furthermore, many women and trans* persons – in family contexts and also in work spaces where different manifestations of hierarchy play out – make the decision to embody a submissive role, either due to their personal values aligning with religious fundamentalist family values,[77] as a result of emotional abuse or other manipulative conditioning of senses of dependency[78] - including the need for approval - or out of fear.[79] This framework by no means seeks to negate that submissiveness can be a conscious, voluntary and strategic act of self-defense in situations in which we are exposed to imminent danger. In this sense, our decision to be submissive is an act of agency and containment of our power. Rather, the moments in which we do embody submissiveness, when we are aware of them, invite us to reflect on how and when we give others the authority to validate our existence, dictate our needs, and sanction our desires. This framework suggests that there may be moments in which we deny ourselves our right to self-determination, by choosing to give others this authority.

As activists, we also inflict violence against ourselves. This is sometimes hard for us to acknowledge, given that we often consider ourselves progressive in our politics about the roles we as women and trans* people - and even activists - play in our spaces of association. Yet sometimes, we are the first to inflict internal punishment on ourselves, under the guise of being of service to our movements. While more and more feminists are rightfully speaking out about the exploitative mechanisms of non-governmental organisational work, our self-deprivation of care is still a violence that we continue to hold silence around. We don't want to be seen as self-indulgent, or for our exercise of boundaries to be interpreted as a lack of commitment.[80] We prefer to contextualise "our failure to care for ourselves and its effect as only to be expected of a good activist".[81] *A feminist framework to self-defense must acknowledge our lack of self-care as an act of violence, and therefore a political tactic to silence, harm and control us.* If self-defense involves acknowledging our agency and capacity in taking responsibility for those things we can control, it requires us to include within that responsibility a defense against the way we mistreat ourselves.

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[74] Daisy Teitinimatang Betero (Kiribati). 1 October 2020. Personal communication. And Lina Khalifeh (Jordan) 14 September 2020. Personal communication.

[75] Maca Orellana Caperochipi (Chile). 22 October 2020. Personal communication. *(translated from Spanish using Deepl.com).*

[76] Lack of self-confidence was also something felt by trainers themselves. Because so much of our understanding of the multiple landscapes we inhabit is informed by the North, and shaped by cis-men, there is a prevalent sense of inadequacy, among women and trans* digital safety and physical self-defense trainers from the South, regarding their expertise.

[77] Lina Khalifeh (Jordan). 14 September 2020. Personal communication.

[78] Leria Francois (South Africa). 17 September 2020.

[79] Nozipho Mthembu (South Africa) 17 October 2020. Workshop conversation.

[80] Artemisa, Elige and CREA (2008) Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists. Date accessed: 14 September 2020. https://creaworld.org/publications/self-care-and-self-defence-manual-feminist-activists-2008-0

[81] Ibid.

Dismantling the dichotomies of our bodies

REarlier we established that our bodies are our first contested territory against which violence is enacted. In this section, we will get to know more intricately the multiple dimensions of our bodies. This will not only equip us to better understand how violence is enacted against these dimensions, but also how, together, they make up the totality of our being - the very expression of which, is what it means to be alive.

The multiple dimensions of our bodies and ourselves are erased by colonial attempts to reduce them to dichotomies. These dichotomies are used to define, but also restrict and classify our bodies within socio-political structures that, ultimately, dictate who has power and who does not. A feminist framework for self-defense therefore calls us to dismantle these dichotomies. *The dimensions of the self are absolutely infinite and informed by the lineages of wisdoms we are born into.* For the purposes of this paper, the concept of 'soma' will be applied to our articulation of, not only the multiple landscapes we embody, but also the multiple possibilities. We will also explore the concept of 'soma' in relation to the self - the personal and collective - which is more than the sum of its parts.

Engaging the whole – the totality of our being
Our call to dismantle the dichotomies of our bodies is not new. It is something for which feminists and social justice activists more generally have been pushing for generations. Our LGBTQI communities, for example, continue to fight hard battles for the continua of gender identities and sexual orientations to be recognised and respected. Our traditional healers and healing justice activists have long resisted colonial medical and wellbeing practices that assume the separation of our minds and bodies, and negate our spirits. Social justice campaigners continue to push back against the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, and protest for the equal distribution of national wealth.

Cynthia (Lebanon) confronted the masculine/feminine binary in our recent conversation: we associate 'strength' with masculinity, for example, but "why should masculinity be this display"? Strength, and other embodiments of energy, should not be gendered.[82] Binaries enable exclusion. *Dichotomising our bodies within the context of our patriarchal social order is what excludes us from the inheritance of privilege and legitimises the harm done against us.* Feminist self-defense requires us to acknowledge the infinite dimensions that make up our bodies; to integrate an holistic approach when articulating what harm against our bodies entails; and also fight for the wholeness of our bodies that we desire.

The body's dimensions are also intricately connected. As part of our necessary resistance to binary conceptualisations of the body - which legitimise or otherwise trivialise harm done to us - we must reject the Cartesian construction of mind-body separation. Rather, this self-defense framework draws on the concept of 'soma,' developed by the Brazilian activist, Roberto Freire,[83] as well as ancient martial arts philosophies and geographically contextualised traditional wisdoms,[84] that help us articulate an holistic understanding of what our bodies are and do.

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[82] Cynthia El Khoury (Lebanon). 21 September 2020. Personal communication.
[83] Freire, Roberto (1988) Soma – uma terapia anarquista – volume 1 – A alma é o corpo. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara.
[84] There are an increasing number of feminist practitioners writing about our need to resist Cartesian perspectives and calling for a more holistic view of our bodies in order to deepen our understanding around the effects of violence, and therefore, of holistic and meaningful responses. See, for example, Horn, Jessica (2020) Decolonising emotional well-being and mental health in development: African feminist innovations. Gender and Development. 28 (1). 85-98.

Soma – the Greek word for 'body' – aims to describe "the totality of being in the widest and most complete sense". It assumes "no hierarchical separation of mind, body, soul, emotion..."[85] and understands *our desires, thoughts, ideologies, relationships and socioeconomic environments as extensions of the body.*[86] This perspective confronts conceptualisations of the self that alienate us from our environments.

As sites of control and oppression, our bodies' movement, identities, behaviours and purposes are restricted and dictated to us in landscapes where patriarchy exists. We can see this particularly in relation to technology, as one of the environments we inhabit. "Does a body end where skin touches, or does it not continue into our apps we use, our digital profiles"?[87] Our physical bodies are not only in front of the screens of our digital devices: reading, interpreting, feeling and typing; but are behind our data, in the form of our interests, desires and fears, photographs, audios and personal information. Privacy,[88] expression[89] and consent,[90] for example, are very corporally-informed notions, and so when our rights to them are violated online, we experience it in embodied ways. The protection of our online profiles and accounts is thus, also the protection of our bodies.

Engaging the whole – more than the sum of its parts

Beyond the intrinsic interconnectedness we find with different aspects of our internal and external selves, we must also blur the binaries of (individual) self and other. The highly individualised concept of the self - coming predominantly from orthodox Western psychology - negates the interpersonal body and the collective body as impacted by violence, and therefore, as needing mindful attention, defense and care. We experience the effects of this viscerally, when our children and other family members are targeted in order to attack us.[91] *Our wellbeing is intricately intertwined with the wellbeing of those with whom we identify and love, and any violence done against them is felt by us personally.* As Ugandan activist Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng, in her description of healing as a collective process, explains, a woman "will never heal when she knows that her children have gone without food..."[92] Maca (Chile) also describes the effects of this when explaining how the brutal murders of Daniel Zamudio in 2012, whose death became a symbol of homophobic violence in Chile, and of Nicole Saavedra in 2016, which impacted the lesbian community, triggered fear among "those of us who lived on the edge of the norm, on the border of... cis-hetero-normalised bodies."[93]

[85] Soma experiments (2011) Soma. Date accessed: 30 October 2020. https://somaexperiments.wordpress.com/soma/
[86] Firth, Rhiannon (2016) Somatic pedagogies: Critiquing and resisting the affective discourse of the neoliberal state from an embodied anarchist perspective. Ephemera: Theory and politics in organization. 16 (4). 121-142.
[87] Smita Vanniyar (India) 15 September 2020. Workshop conversation.
[88] https://feministinternet.org/en/principle/privacy-data
[89] https://feministinternet.org/en/principle/expression
[90] https://feministinternet.org/en/principle/consent
[91] AWID (2014) Our right to safety: Women human rights defenders' holistic approach to protection. Date accessed: 1 October 2020. https://www.awid.org/publications/our-right-safety-women-human-rights-defenders-holistic-approach-protection
[92] As quoted in Horn, Jessica (2020) Decolonising emotional well-being and mental health in development: African feminist innovations. Gender and Development. 28 (1). 85-98.
[93] Maca Orellana Caperochipi (Chile). 22 October 2020. Personal communication. *(translated from Spanish using Deepl.com).*

Even when we consider how surveillance, for example, as an "historical tool of patriarchy",[94] is used by our intimate partners, our families, the state, and others to control and restrict our bodies, we must also consider the impact that mass surveillance has on the collective self. We see how the mass exploitation of our health and energy to fuel the hegemonic cogs of capitalism exacerbates intergenerational, communally-shared anxiety and distress, which we, in turn, embody individually. When our individual and collective bodies face harmful attack, we experience shock in our nervous systems and collective consciousness. Self-defense invites us to embody our collective identities while also resisting their normative social constructions.

Notions of mutual interdependence, such as *ubuntu*,[95] are affirmations of the collective self shared widely among societies across the African continent. Taiwo Afuape further explains the interpersonal, inter-dependent reality of our beings when she explains that, for many communities, "maintaining a connection to family, community, dead relatives and ancestors may be more significant than individual thoughts and feelings".[96] Numerous digital archives of the names and works of activists in our movements have been created in acknowledgment of the icebergs of impact of which our work is just the tip.[97] *When we start to understand our movements and communities (past, present and future) as extensions of ourselves, we must acknowledge that violence inflicted against us "impacts on and is held ... by other people that make up the collective self"*.[98]

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[94] Feminist Principles of the Internet. Privacy and data. Date accessed: 30 October 2020. https://feministinternet.org/en/principle/privacy-data

[95] For further reading on the notion of ubuntu as an African philosopy, see Nabudere, Dani (2005) Ubuntu philosophy: memory and reconciliation. Texas Scholar Works. 1-20.

[96] Afuape, Taiwo (2011) Power, Resistance and Liberation Therapy with Survivors of Trauma: To Have Our Hearts Broken. London and New York: Routledge.

[97] See, for example, Take Back The Tech!. Museum of Movements. Date accessed: 30 October 2020. https://www.takebackthetech.net/museum or AWID. WHRD Tribute. Date accessed: 30 October 2020. https://www.awid.org/whrd-tribute

[98] Horn, Jessica (2020) Decolonising emotional well-being and mental health in development: African feminist innovations. Gender and Development. 28 (1). 85-98.

Towards the totality of our being

We now understand that a feminist framework for self-defense incorporates both our protection from imminent violence, as well as our response to our imminent needs. We have also established that violence can manifest in any of the infinite landscapes of our existence - including our bodies, organisations, online communities, relationships and sociopolitical systems. Furthermore, we know that our body as a target of violence is not just skin deep, but extends beyond our physical body: across the multiverses within us, and to other dimensions, including those we identify as a part of our collective selves.

When we consider the breadth of this, it is important to reflect on why this is so important for our lives; how incorporating these articulations – of the violence we face, and of our bodies against which violence is inflicted – influences how we understand the purpose of our self-defense practices. In this section, our framework offers a reflection on what it could mean to be alive, and how self-defense, through the setting of personal boundaries, gives us the space to grow into the totality of our being. Lastly, we consider what vital strengths we have to defend our pursuit of this growth, and why protecting those vital strengths creates the conditions that enable our full expression.

Being alive

In 'Dismantling the dichotomies of the body,' we critiqued the Cartesian mind-body separation that has long legitimised the exploitation and suffering of marginalised communities. It is that same separation that has led us to understand that being alive means to be merely breathing. Our understanding of being alive has become conflated with our understanding of survival. We have thus had to bring other descriptors in to speak of *that state of being that fully embodies the creativity, freedom, humanity, dignity and happiness we desire*, such as 'wellbeing.' However, this framework suggests that being alive is synonymous with the full embodiment and liberated expression of our soma – the totality of our being.

A feminist framework to self-defense aims to defend our being alive that is beyond just the functioning of our physical bodies, simultaneously bearing in mind that *the life of our physical bodies is the very bedrock on which all other aspects of our aliveness is possible.* This principle offers a deep political dimension to the protection and health of our physical bodies, against which any harm enacted becomes unacceptable.

Our sacred healing

Conceptualisations of care and wellbeing have become a nexus of reflection among activists over the past decade, and rightly so.[99] While feminist practitioners and thinkers are effectively articulating our need to politicise these conceptualisations, this paper aims to argue the importance of defending our aliveness through a healing lens, rather than through lenses of care or wellbeing. This paper does by no means seek to dispute our very real need to claim practices of care and states of wellbeing as aspects of our daily lived realities. Rather, the word 'healing' is used here in relation to our self-defense practices, because it activates these realities as something that we do, rather than have, and furthermore implies our need to move from an injured state towards a state of wholeness, that we have not yet reached. Healing is something we need in order to stay alive, which is different to notions of care that can often be framed as indulgent, despite our awareness as activists of the importance of radicalising our perspectives on care.

This is particularly important when we contextualise our practices of self-defense. As mentioned previously, normative frameworks of self-defense and digital safety training problematically frame attacks as isolated, out-of-the-ordinary scenarios. Similarly, orthodox Western understandings of trauma "tend to be predicated on a privileged idea... that the work of therapy is the work of 'returning' an individual"[100] to a place of wellbeing. Yet as women and trans* people born into landscapes of misogyny, conflict, homophobia and other marginalisations, our everyday lived experiences, individually and collectively, are of violence and injury.

Acknowledging the violence we've faced requires us to reflect on how that violence has injured us, and our choice to defend ourselves from violence that is perpetual, arises out of our own recognition that we do not deserve to be harmed by violence, and so must take action. Our decision to set limitations to the violence we face is possible, because we know our battlefields. *Setting our boundaries is an act of protecting our vulnerabilities that have arisen from exploring those contested territories before, personally, collectively and ancestrally*. Those boundaries we set are not only there to prevent our exposure to further violence, but give ourselves the space to heal from violence we've already experienced. *Our processes of healing are continuous, and are active journeys towards a place of full creative and liberated expression of the totality of our being.* It is this sacred process that we are protecting when we engage in feminist self-defense.

99 Horn, Jessica (2020) Thoughts on radical care in African feminist praxis. The sociological review. Date accessed: 30 October 2020.
100 Horn, Jessica (2020) Decolonising emotional well-being and mental health in development: African feminist innovations. Gender and Development. 28 (1). 85-98.

Protecting our vital strengths

Just as the different forms of violence we face vary across context and can be enacted against us within the multiple landscapes we inhabit and explore, so do our resources vary. But they also show up for us across multiple dimensions of our existence if we acknowledge and know how to use them. As aforementioned, self-defense requires us to be resourceful with what we have available to us. These resources are our vital strengths: vital, because they are essential to our healing, and the very things that keep us alive.

While our vital strengths are many and depend on the wisdoms available to us in our contexts; our breath, our emotions, self-awareness, our communities and support networks, and our freedom of movement were among the vital strengths identified in the research. They create the conditions for our healing, and thus must be protected in our practices of self- and collective defense.

One vital strength in particular is our activism itself. Our activism's power to heal us was made strikingly clear during processes of this research, in which the overwhelming majority of self-defense and digital safety trainers and women human rights defenders that participated, came into their training and defense work seeking answers for their own healing as a result of past experiences of gender-based violence. Self-defense and safety training became a way to regain senses of power after internalising the trauma of an emotionally abusive relationship or the hateful murder of an activist community member. Passing on their knowledge often came about as a result of requests made by others in their community who, in turn, recognised those skills as vital strengths they needed in order to feel safe and alive.

In their paper, *Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul*, organisational development activists, Hope and Rudo Chigudu, pay particular attention to the liberating potential of working in activist organisations where there exists 'seeing,' 'presence,' and 'love'.[101] In dialogue, Hope explains, *"Wellness is not an additional responsibility or luxury. It's actually the work*. It's about an organisation being so well that it has the energy to produce sustainable results for its constituency. It's about enabling all of us to break free of limits created by power dynamics, resentment, suspicion and brokenness".[102]

When our activism embodies the positive states of "deep social and spiritual connection and belonging found in collective voice, movement and creative self-expression",[103] our bodies become locations of that freedom, pleasure, connection and creativity themselves. Our activisms become a form of self- and collective defense against the objectified instrumentalisation and commodification of our value as marginalised communities. This enables the creation of healing spaces where the totality of our creative self-expression can regenerate, and therefore, shape the territories in which we live, work and wander.

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[101] Chigudu, Hope and Chigudu, Rudo (2015) Strategies for Building and Organisation with a Soul. African Institute for Integrated Responses to VAWG and HIV/AIDS (AIR)

[102] Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

[103] Horn, Jessica (2020) Decolonising emotional well-being and mental health in development: African feminist innovations. Gender and Development. 28 (1). 85-98.

When our activism embodies the positive states of "deep social and spiritual connection and belonging found in collective voice, movement and creative self-expression", our bodies become locations of that freedom, pleasure, connection and creativity themselves.
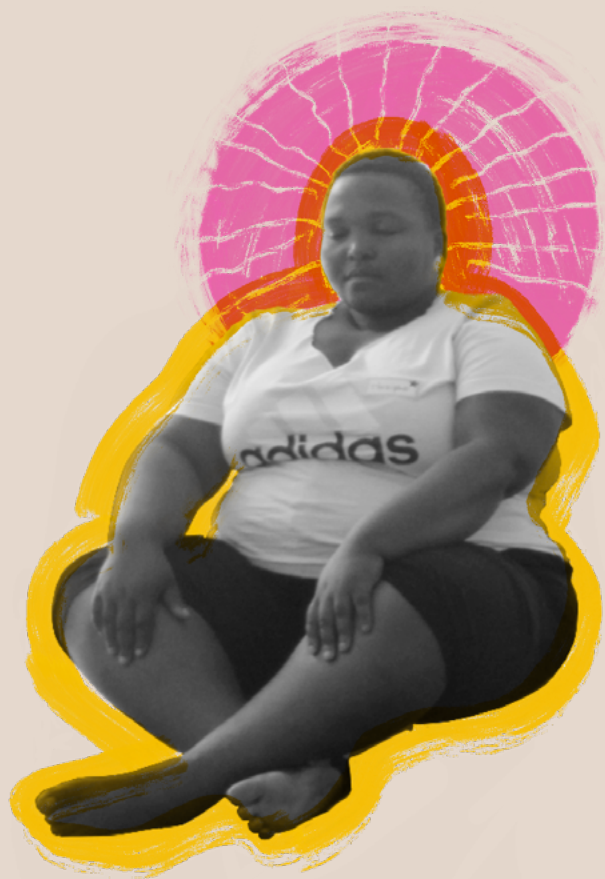
Conclusion

A feminist framework for self-defense locates itself within, and supports feminist strategies for, preventing and responding to gender-based violence. It identifies this violence as a strategic exercise of power over us. Defending ourselves and others against violence is therefore a political practice of resistance against patriarchal and other oppressive systems that benefit from our silenced, controlled and injured states of being.

Self- and collective defense is a system of voluntary and conscious, personal and collective actions, and its feminist approach requires us to acknowledge the agency and capacity we have to set personal boundaries and address our imminent needs by using the resources we have available to us. This framework invites us to identify the different forms of violence we face, explore the resources we have available to us across the multidimensional landscapes of our existence, and engage in creating the enabling environments free from violence we envision in our spaces of activism and training themselves.

As we acknowledge our bodies and our selves as favoured territories for targeted attack, hacking into the oppressive systems that harm us also means dismantling the dichotomies that give meaning to their injuring of our bodies. Feminist self-defense incorporates the totality of our body – the soma – as both a resource and as something of inherent value that must be protected. It also understands the self as individual, interpersonal and collective. The survival and capacity for healing of the individual and collective selves are co-dependent, and cannot manifest without the other.

Finally, we recognise that our self- and collective defense against violence gives us space to heal, and that this healing is necessary for our survival and expression of what it means to be alive. Defense practices are effective when we are able to identify and exercise our vital strengths, which include our activisms. Just as feminist self-defense trainings attempt to create the very enabling environment free from violence that we fight for, so do our activisms create conditions of possibility in our everyday lives to inhabit an embodied practice of healing and vitality.

This framework for feminist self-defense is a contribution to the infinite and decentralised practices and thought processes infiltrating oppressive conditions to imagine, shape and embody the feminist visions we have for our communities, territories and selves. This work continues and survives thanks to the women and trans* human rights defenders globally who invest their work in the collective belief that a world free from violence is possible.

✳ About the author ✳

Christy is a feminist activist and Brazilian jiu-jitsu athlete from South Africa. She works with organisations, collectives and individuals in strengthening their campaigns for dismantling the oppressive systems that impact our everyday lives, but also are internalised by us. She uses self-defense trainings as a channel for supporting people in their journey of liberating their bodies, reclaiming their agency, and accessing their inherent strength. She is a fierce believer in the body as a container of healing, creativity and magic, and understands play as essential to our full, creative and free expression.