

The Role of Empowerment Self-Defense in Sexual Violence Prevention

“We could create the cultural shift we need to build a safer future. If we can teach children to set and respect boundaries, understand the concept of consent, and know that they have the power to protect themselves and their loved ones, we can raise adults who will command respect by treating the world around them with value and with love.”

-Yehudit Zicklin-Sidikman, CEO of El HaLev

Sexual and gender-based violence is one of the leading causes of injury among women; according to the World Health Organization 1 in 3, or 35%, of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence as some point in their lifetime. El HaLev is an Israeli non-profit organization that is dedicated to the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence among some of the most vulnerable populations worldwide. El HaLev’s method of Empowerment Self-Defense(ESD) has been crafted over the past forty years by women with backgrounds in various academic fields, including education, psychology, and social work, with curricula that can be adapted to address cultural sensitivity and meet the needs of specific communities such as: survivors of sexual and domestic violence, children, teenage girls at-risk, religious minorities, seniors, refugees, the LGBTQ population and people with special needs.

In a study commissioned by the European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, the use of feminist self-defense was examined and named as an effective tool for violence prevention. The study concluded that self-defense is a promising practice that should be more widely promoted on a national level and more space should be made for it in policy, financing and research.

The ESD Method was born from the synthesis between women's everyday realities, feminist ideology and sensitivity to the psychology of women and other high-risk populations. This method includes techniques for setting healthy boundaries, assertiveness skills, techniques

for de-escalation, confidence building drills, how to assess and identify a potentially dangerous situation and violent behavior, confident body language skills as well as physical techniques to use as needed. The goal is to provide women with a set of tools that can help them identify potentially dangerous situations; the time has come for an intervention that will not limit the freedoms of those at high-risk of sexual and gender-based violence but rather expand them.

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