

Empowerment self-defense as a strategy to promote family resilience in Moldova

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Family resilience can be hindered by the existence of violence within the family system. As is true for most parts of the world, domestic violence is prevalent in Moldova. Survivors of violence have an increased risk of experiencing negative health, education, and economic outcomes. In this article, we describe a novel intervention called Empowerment Self-Defense (ESD). ESD is based on the idea that self-defense is not only about learning physical techniques, but also about developing confidence and autonomy as psychological aspects necessary to face challenges, regardless of the circumstances. We explain how implementation of culturally-adapted ESD programs could promote family resilience by shifting social norms and attitudes, and improving outcomes for survivors and families in Moldova, and finally by decreasing rates of violence.

Keywords: *Empowerment self-defense, family resilience, violence prevention*

Împuternicire prin autoapărare ca strategie de promovare a rezilienței familiei în Moldova

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Reziliența familiei poate fi afectată de existența violenței în cadrul sistemului familial. Precum și în majoritatea părților lumii, violența domestică este răspândită și în Moldova. Supraviețuitoarele violenței au un risc sporit de a se confrunta cu probleme în materie de sănătate, educație și aspecte economice. În prezentul articol, descriem o intervenție inedită numită împuternicire prin autoapărare (Empowerment Self-Defense — ESD). ESD se bazează pe ideea că autoapărarea nu înseamnă doar învățarea tehnicilor fizice, ci și dezvoltarea încrederii și autonomiei ca aspecte psihologice necesare pentru a face față provocărilor, indiferent de circumstanțe. Noi explicăm modul în care implementarea programelor de ESD adaptate cultural ar putea promova reziliența familiei prin schimbarea normelor și atitudinilor sociale, și îmbunătățirea rezultatelor pentru supraviețuitoarele și familiile din Moldova, iar ca finalitate poate conduce la scăderea ratelor violenței.

Cuvinte cheie: *împuternicire prin autoapărare, reziliență familială, prevenirea violenței*

Introduction

Family systems have a critical role in the psychosocial, intellectual, and physical development and well-being of individuals across the lifespan [1]. From infancy and throughout childhood, families serve as a window to the larger society [2]. Though family systems can have a protective role, they can also be sources of violence and harm, which can have lasting effects throughout a lifetime.

Violence against women, girls, and children remains a significant concern worldwide. The situation in Moldova is like most places in that rates of violence against women are high. Since the age of 15, two out of five women (40%) have reported experience of physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of a partner or non-partner [3]. Of the women who said they have had a previous partner, 37% experienced one or more forms of violence by their previous partner. Among women with a current partner, 25% experienced violence perpetrated by their current partner. More than one in five women reported that they experienced a form of physical violence (usually in the form of slapping and beating) by an adult (usually their parents) before they were 15 years old [3, p. iii].

Rates of violence by non-partners were also high with 17 % of women overall reporting non-partner violence, and almost half (49%) reporting experiences of sexual harassment since the age of 15 [3, p.iii].

Most Moldovan women seem to be aware of the violence against women and children in their country. More than 75% of women in Moldova think that violence against women is common, “including 28% who think that it is very common. One-third (33%) personally know someone among their family and friends who has been subjected to domestic violence, and the same proportion know someone from their neighborhood who has been subjected to violence. Many have heard of services to help affected women; however, very few women have actually accessed those services” [3, p.iii].

Indeed, this awareness is reflected in the large-scale efforts and resources dedicated to combat family- and gender-based violence in Moldova, and the recent ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which is the Council of Europe Convention for preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

Empowerment Self-Defense

As efforts to prevent gender-based violence and promote family resilience in Moldova continue, practitioners and policy-makers should

consider implementation of Empowerment Self-Defense (ESD), which is a violence prevention and sexual assault risk reduction program designed specifically for women. Self-defense training in general refers to any training aimed at teaching practical skills to avoid, deter, interrupt, or resist violence [4].

ESD is a distinct form of self-defense training—it is a feminist approach that teaches evidence-based and comprehensive skills while addressing the social context of violence. ESD classes focus on both preventing violence from happening and also responding to violence when it occurs. ESD curricula tend to focus more heavily on situations of assault instigated by acquaintances and intimate partners (because they occur more frequently), though situations of stranger assaults are also addressed [4; 5]. In addition to physical techniques (e.g., kicks, strikes, and releases from grabs, chokeholds, and pins), an emphasis is also placed on verbal assertiveness, boundary setting, personal awareness, and knowledge building (e.g., identifying signs of aggression and coercive tactics commonly used by offenders [4; 6].

Because women are assaulted most often by men they know (i.e., not strangers), ESD classes address the distinctive challenges of these situations, such as women’s reluctance to harm those they know and/or are close to [5; 7].

Participants of ESD are empowered to choose among a range of options that work best for them in any given situation, and the comprehensive nature of ESD is intended to maximize freedom rather than restrict behavior and reinforce fear of violence [4; 6].

Using ESD to Promote Family Resilience

In this next section, we argue that ESD has potential to promote family resilience in Moldova by reducing rates of violence, empowering women, and improving health outcomes for women.

Existing policies, norms, and attitudes across the globe tend to position specific gender identities within imbalanced power structures that privilege men and subordinate women. These gender inequities and imbalances are a cause and a consequence of violence against women worldwide. As is common across many cultures, Moldovan women perceive their culture to be “a patriarchal society where men dominate at home, in the workplace and in the public sphere” [3, p. iv]. Similarly, Moldovan women hold a strong belief that they are expected to endure violence and be emotionally strong in the face of victimization.

A recent study found that over half of Moldovan women believe that family violence is a private matter, and similarly, nearly half endorse victim-blaming views and believe that psychological and sexual violence is considered normal in relationships [3, p. v]. It is critical that these dangerous myths that normalize and perpetuate violence be eradicated.

ESD could be an effective intervention to shift Moldovan women's beliefs about gender, violence, and victimization. ESD curricula encourage women to challenge and interrupt normative beliefs and attitudes. For example, women are encouraged to shed deeply ingrained assumptions that men are inherently and unstopably stronger than women, and the false myth that men's violence cannot be stopped [4; 6]. The physical techniques taught in an ESD course are purposefully practical, easy-to-learn techniques that any woman, regardless of her size, strength, or ability can execute. In ESD courses, women learn and practice how to use the strong points of their bodies to strike vulnerable areas on an assailant's body, with an emphasis on the fact that every assailant, regardless of their size or strength, has vulnerable areas on their body (e.g., eyeballs, knees, groin, nose, solar plexus) [6].

By learning and practicing these techniques, students are able to transform their understanding about gendered bodies, in which women are socialized and assumed to be weak, passive, and submissive, and men are assumed to be dominant, strong, and aggressive [6; 8-11].

Throughout the duration of an ESD training course, students observe their classmates they initially perceive to be weak or small perform powerful verbal and physical techniques, and they themselves experience the effect of their own powerful strikes on handheld targets, heavy bags, or padded attackers. Some ESD courses culminate with each woman breaking a wooden board with a palm-heel strike or another physical technique. With these experiences, it is difficult for the students to continue believing the false, yet deeply ingrained narrative that women are inevitably weak [6]. This transformation affects the way students perceive their own bodies, the bodies of other women, and their overall perceptions about gender [6].

Another reason that ESD could be an effective intervention to promote family resilience is that ESD curricula focus on empowering women rather than restricting them [4; 6]. This is achieved in three ways.

First, many safety courses and non-ESD teach restrictive strategies that tell women what they should or should not do and place the burden

for safety on the woman (which also tends to reinforce victim-blame) [4; 11]. Alternatively, ESD presents empirical information about risks and strategies and then empowers women to make decisions for themselves based on their own personal situations [4].

Second, ESD empowers women by infusing into the curriculum the belief that women are worth defending and have the right to defend themselves [4]. Women are often socialized to consider the needs and desires of others as more important than their own [12], so learning to prioritize their own safety and their own needs is transformative and empowering for many women [4].

Third, ESD instructors acknowledge that there are likely to be survivors in every class. Instructors integrate this awareness into their pedagogy by acknowledging the experiences of survivors and affirming that no matter how they responded to the assault, a survivor did the right thing at the time because she successfully survived the assault. Affirming and honoring survivors in this way “can be a profound reframing of women’s experiences in a culture where victims are often blamed for provoking an assault and/or for the choices they make in responding to it” [4, p. 228].

Moreover, emerging evidence suggests that ESD may be an effective tool for helping survivors of violence heal from past experiences of trauma [11].

Conclusion

Preventing family violence and promoting family resilience will require multi-level approaches across individuals, policies, and systems.

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), ratified by Republic of Moldova in October, 2021, focuses on several areas, obliging States Parties to the Convention to take a number of measures to act against violence against women and domestic violence. Prevention area includes commitments regularly run awareness-raising campaigns, train professionals in close contact with victims, include within teaching materials issues such as gender equality and non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, set up treatment programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence and for sex offenders, work closely with NGOs, and involve the media and the private sector in eradicating gender stereotypes and promoting mutual respect [13].

Prevention efforts should address assumptions about gender within the family and seek to dismantle gender inequities that persist in the family context. With the positive outcomes linked to ESD—such as decreased rates of violence, shifts in beliefs and attitudes toward gender, and decreased self-blame among survivors of violence—implementing ESD programs for women and girls in Moldova could be one step toward shifting the culture around gender and violence and promoting resilience, empowerment, and wellbeing within families and society in Moldova.

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