Essential Elements for Effective Self-Defense Education for Migrant and Displaced Women

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by

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ABSTRACT

This project was designed to teach self-defense classes to refugee and asylum seeking women and found some important factors to consider when designing self-defense programs. It began by partnering with the Women's Resilience Center, a department within the International Rescue Committee in the San Diego office, to host classes with clients that are already receiving services from them. The model and design of the classes were inspired by existing organizations that provide self-defense or martial arts to similar communities of women. After offering five weeks of self-defense classes, what became clear was that the broad elements of community, comfortability, and accessibility were essential to making sure the women could attend and participate in the classes. These elements made the self-defense program feasible, effective, and culturally responsive.

INTRODUCTION

Having personal experience in martial arts and working with current or former refugees and asylum seekers have largely shaped my worldview, and absolutely influenced this project. My background includes practicing various styles of martial arts for over twelve years and teaching for five of them. In that time, I have earned three black belts. Mixed martial arts training includes introduction to styles such as hapkido, judo, jiu jitsu, kobudo, muay thai, and karate, which were learned as a mixture and blending of the different styles together. My experience training in martial arts has made me more confident, given me a safe space to be myself, and empowered me to be a stronger woman. Martial arts can have a negative narrative, where people think it is only about violence and harming others. An example of this is many times when people first find out that I practice martial arts, the immediate question is "can you hurt me?" While it is true that some gyms focus on the violent aspect, there are ways martial arts can be a tool for empowerment and teach self-defense that is beneficial and practical. I strongly believe more women should be training in martial arts, not only for self-defense reasons but also for the growth of self-esteem, confidence, and empowerment.

Over the past two years, as a volunteer and intern in the City Heights area, my perspective was broadened as I worked with people who are current or former refugees or asylum seekers. I learned a lot from the people I was working with and saw how frustrating and difficult it can be to adjust to living in the United States. Yet, I also witnessed and experienced firsthand some beautiful aspects of community and resettling. The internship and volunteer experience helped me see how the organizations were working to create a safe space for people to learn and offered a place to develop community. For this research project, I wondered what it would look like to tie together my passion of martial arts and my desire to help migrant and

displaced populations feel welcome and safe. After looking at some existing self-defense programs for refugee women, I envisioned what it would look like to create a similar program in San Diego. What follows is the reasoning and data that hopefully depicts the self-defense classes offered with clarity. My biggest request is to leave behind preconceived notions and stereotypes of martial arts, refugees and migrants to fully listen. Try to see the women in the data as people, because although they have labels that define their situations, they are, most importantly, humans.

The project began with the question: How can self-defense classes be used as a tool of empowerment for refugee women? After some research and conversations with my committee, it was decided that empowerment would be really hard to measure over the span of time available for this project. The question was then shifted to: How does free access to self-defense classes impact refugee women now living in San Diego? Looking at existing literature, the focus centered on the impacts of martial arts, programs that work with refugee communities, and the concept of sport for development and peace. The inspiration behind the model and design of the self-defense classes I taught came from existing organizations that provide self-defense or martial arts to similar communities of women. After researching, my research question was still too broad to answer thoroughly with the data collected. However, the data collected answered a related question well: What are important elements in teaching martial arts/self-defense classes to displaced women and migrant women?

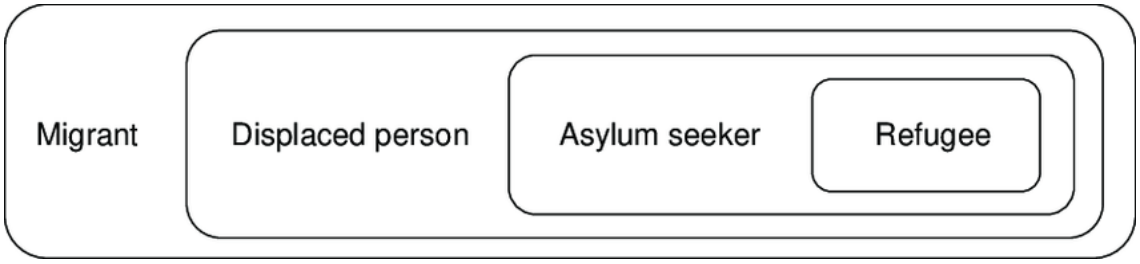
Important Definitions

Before moving on, it is important to be clear about some definitions of terms that will be referenced. The previous paragraph describes the shift as a result of how well the question was

able to be answered, but another change that was made related to the language used to describe the women participants. Initially, the study was going to only work with refugee women. But, after reading *Sport, Forced Migration, and the 'Refugee Crisis'* by Enrico Michelini, there was a recognized need to change the wording in order to not overgeneralize or mislabel the population of women who were participating in the project (2023, p. 46). Figure 1 below from Michelini's book shows the way these terms interact with one another and the reason the question and title shifted to specify migrant and displaced persons (2023, p. 45). Although migrant is an umbrella term, when people first hear migrant the association is often just with immigrants and often does not include refugee or asylum seekers. This is why, in the new question and title, there will be references to both migrant and displaced people to be more specific and capture the general understanding that some, if not all, of the women who participated in these classes were forced to move from their home countries.

Figure 1

A typology of migrants (Michelini, 2023, p. 45)



Migrant: "An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons." (Sironi et al., 2019, p. 132)

Displaced persons: "have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, either across an international border or within a State, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters" (Sironi et al., 2019, p. 55)

Asylum seeker: "an individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted. Not every asylum seeker will be ultimately recognized as a refugee, but every recognized refugee is initially an asylum seeker" (Sironi et al., 2019, p. 14)

Refugee: (1951 Convention) "A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (Sironi et al., 2019, p. 171)

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review looks at concepts and studies that have been done relating to displacement, sport, gender, and martial arts. There were not any studies that focused on all of these subjects in depth, but there were intersections between the categories in a few existing studies. The relationship between sport and displaced persons is a complex one in that people's experiences of

displacement vary greatly depending on their circumstances and there are many types of sports and ways people relate to sport. Although there are studies on specific sports in relation to displaced persons, the focus for this literature review has been on either general sport studies or on martial arts studies. The literature review begins with explaining sport for peace and development and sport for social inclusion, which have impacted many sports programs working with migrant communities. Then the role of martial arts as a sport is evaluated, especially as it relates to women's involvement in it. The current literature was important in understanding factors to be aware of when creating a program for research.

When working with migrant and displaced people, it is important to be empathetic and listen to what they need, while at the same time not limiting their humanity solely to their situation. Recently, there has been greater investment in sports programs that seek to provide health, therapeutic, or social opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers (Spaaij, Broerse, et al., 2019, p. 2). This is a positive thing, but there is an emphasis and caution within existing literature to make sure that people, namely those with refugee backgrounds, are seen as "social actors" rather than "objects" of research (Doná, 2007, as cited in Spaaij, Luguetti, et al., 2022, p. 410). De Martini Ugolotti and Caudwell also "argued that scholars in sport, leisure and forced migration have often unwittingly contributed to narratives that construct refugees as a 'kind of person'" (as cited in Spaaij, Luguetti, et al., 2022, p. 407). While there is a distinction between migrants, displaced persons, refugees, and asylum seekers, there is also a need to be cautious to not label people in a stigmatizing way or oversimplify within these labels (Spaaij, Broerse, et al., 2019, p. 12). It is important to recognize that sport is considered by anthropologists to be a reflection of the surrounding society, with "social structures, power dynamics, gender roles, and racial disparities" (Anthroholic, 2023). These dynamics directly impact migrants and displaced

people as a result of living in a new space. Understanding the cultural and societal factors that influence sport is essential in being able to address the issues, especially when working in a cross-cultural environment.

Sport for Development

The primary focus for this research is on sport programs for migrants and displaced persons now living in the United States, but it is important to understand the impact of Sport for Development and Peace on a global scale and to refer to studies done in the European Union relating to sports programs for migrants and displaced persons. While researching, there were two major groups of thought; (1) those who believe the benefits of sport were way overestimated and (2) those who believe sport is a good tool as long as it is critically analyzed. In *Sport, Refugees, and Forced Migration: A Critical Review of the Literature,* Spaaij et al. evaluated 83 academic publications that spanned across 14 different languages and reviewed between publication years 1996 to 2019. They found key issues and possibilities within this newer field of research. What they found overall were the themes of health promotion, integration/social inclusion, and barriers/facilitators to participation. They also found gaps within the research with embodied experiential dimensions, needing to decolonize research, innovative methodologies, and ethics of research (Spaaij, Broerse, et al., 2019, p. 15). The overarching theme across all of these gaps is hearing about program impact from participants and approaching sport with a human-centered design which participants are a part of creating. This source gave important insight into the current literature of this topic.

Global Perspective

Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) is defined as "the intentional use of sport, physical activity and play to attain specific development and peace objectives" ("Right to Play," 2008). However, this source is also clear that sport in this context needs to be utilized as a tool alongside other development practices, it is not designed to be beneficial on its own ("Right to Play," 2008). The concept of SDP is becoming more common for development within refugee assistance programs internationally (Shamseddin Sami, 2021, p. 17). In 2003, the United Nations adopted Resolution 58/5 which increased the usage of sport as a means of international development (as cited in Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011, p. 1). In general, the United Nations views sport as a partnership to be able to achieve common goals, such as inclusion, participation, community, and bridging divides. They believe sport teaches skills like discipline, confidence, leadership, tolerance, cooperation, and respect. The underlying concept of SDP is that "sport can cut across barriers that divide societies, making it a powerful tool to support conflict prevention and peace-building efforts, both symbolically on the global level and very practically within communities" (United Nations, 2003, p. V).

While SDP has been recognized as a beneficial method by many, there are also many sociologists who believe there is a clear overestimation of how much sports are able to actually do for those who are displaced, especially when they are designed without participant input or feedback (Michelini & Schreiner, 2022, p. 2). Hartmann and Kwuak argue there are too many programs and not enough research done on the ways the sports-based development programs impact the community (2011, pp. 2-3). There have been more studies done recently questioning how SDP programs impact those participating, particularly for those in emergency situations and

in refugee camps (Michelini & Schreiner, 2022, p. 1). It can be argued that a better way to look at the use of sports is by seeing it as an "empty form" which John MacAloon defines as "like any other tool, technology, or social practice whose meaning, use, and impact is dependent on the ways in which it is employed on how and to what ends it is used" (as cited in Hartmann & Kwuak, 2011, p. 6). Michelini and Schreiner emphasize the importance of developing sports programs with multiperspectivity as a way to ensure all needs are met for those involved, while acknowledging that "sport is not a homogenous phenomenon perceived and experienced in the same way by all actors" (2022, p. 2). They argue it is critical for trainers and coaches to adapt sport activities to the specific context they are teaching in and to acknowledge all perspectives to help design program goals that align with refugee needs and perspectives (2022, p. 8).

Global North Perspective

Sport programs designed with SDP in mind tend to be based in Global South countries, but there are still programs using sport for social change in the Global North. In particular, this section focuses on the ways sport has been used to promote social inclusion for displaced persons who are now living in Global North countries, and most of the studies are based in Europe. Between the years of 2013 and 2018, many migrants made their way to the European Union while fleeing conflicts in their home countries. The European Union began referring to this time as a "refugee crisis," which impacted economic, legal, political, and religious factors (Michelini, 2023, p. 26). The many debates revolved around how refugees could be socially integrated into their host countries (Michelini, 2023, p. 27). According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, sports are a potential way in which refugees can be better connected to their

host communities (as cited in Shamseddin Sami, 2021, p. 2). The Council of Europe released a document in 2020 stating:

> The positive values of sport as a tool for promoting human rights, encouraging peace, and fostering international understanding in a spirit of mutual respect between people can be seen to play an important role in helping both host societies and new arrivals in a community come together to build new social connections. Common interests and values can be shared through sport, bringing people together to promote intercultural dialogue, overcome differences, and reduce intolerance (as cited in Michelini, 2023, p. 27).

This shows the acceptance of sport as a means for including new arrivals into existing systems. While this sounds positive and hope-filled, there is a need to be strategic and critical in examining the way sport is used to promote this ideal.

Similar to the perspective on SDP, many sociologists believe the impact of sport is too often accepted in a positive and romanticized way (Michelini, 2023, p. 27). Joppke argues there are many programs advertising social inclusion, when in reality they have been designed with the nation state in mind rather than equal opportunity (as cited in Agergaard, 2018, p. 38). During a study regarding refugee social inclusion through sports, more specifically a Swedish martial arts club, it was found that the rules of the gym "emphasized conformity and behavioral expectations but seemed mistaken for being beneficial to the social inclusion of diverse individuals" (Mickelsson, 2023, p. 847). The main coach claimed the need to help refugees, but utilized a minority-deficit approach, believing the refugees had a "destroyed" mental status and were incapable of participating in martial arts (Mickelsson, 2023, p. 848). The program held an agenda of assimilation, rather than taking into consideration the preferences and needs of the refugees to be able to promote social inclusion (Mickelsson, 2023, p. 850). This is a harmful type of program

that does not have the interests of the participants in mind, but it is being promoted in a way that emphasizes inclusion.

While the example above is not representative of all sports organizations or programs, it goes to show the importance of aligning needs with participants, rather than agendas. When sports programs are desiring to create a place for social inclusion, the priorities of marginalized groups need to be listened to and programs need to be adapted, rather than the expectation that marginalized groups need to assimilate to the existing programs. The term refugee tends to be linked to depressing and negative circumstances, but multiple studies claim the need to use a strengths-based approach when creating sports programs. This type of approach includes acknowledging migrants' and displaced person's "strengths, capabilities, knowledge, and resources" (Spaaij, Broerse, et al., 2019, p. 13). Ultimately, the findings across sources can be summarized as "while scientific results partly corroborate the integrative effect of sport, its role in this context can neither be taken for granted or accepted unconditionally" (Smith et al., 2019, as cited in Michelini, 2023, p. 36). Great care needs to be taken when designing and implementing sports programs that are working with migrants and displaced people to not stereotype, unintentionally harm, or promote agendas.

Martial Arts

Sport for Development and Peace as well as sport for social inclusion are concepts that have been utilized to support programs across many types of sport. This paper focuses on martial arts, specifically as it relates to women. There is a wide range of diversity within martial arts styles and perceived levels of aggression vary across them. The way it is played out in the general public sphere through broadcast boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA) is much more

violent than the average martial arts space tends to be. Although there are some styles of martial arts that promote aggression and winning, the underlying philosophies of many martial arts are gentle and are connected to deeper philosophical roots (Fuller & Lloyd, 2019, p. 23). “What happens in karate training is not so much about hitting; rather, it is the presence of an educational spirit rooted in learning self-defense and the development of technical skill, precision, and mastery of controlling one’s own energy so as not to become susceptible to attacks” (Maclean, 2015, as cited in Abooali, 2022, p. 516). This depiction of karate is wonderful imagery for the type of martial arts referred to in this paper, one focused on learning skills to avoid violence and counteract or defend against attacks.

The styles chosen for this study are more traditional in focus or specific to self-defense because they are some of the styles guided by philosophies or have an emphasis on avoiding violence. Multiple studies have found that longer amounts of time spent training in martial arts can actually reduce aggression in participants (Nosanchuk, 1981, p. 435; Shamseddin Sami, 2021, p. 45). Studies done about self-defense programs have shown the improvement with self-reported levels of participants’ “assertiveness, self-esteem, anxiety, perceived control, fear of sexual assault, self-efficacy, physical competence, and avoidance behaviors” (Brecklin, 2008, as cited in Ganoe, 2019, p. 3). A study by Roth and Basow identified the importance of physical strength for women and argued that martial arts provides a space for women to learn physical power to defend themselves from violence (2004, as cited in Velija et al., 2013, p. 526). It is also argued that self-defense can be a powerful tool for physical empowerment for women and to reject assumptions of weakness (McCaughey, 1997, as cited in Velija et al., 2013, pp. 525-527). Another suggested benefit of martial arts is the potential it has for self-care, self-preservation,

and the influence it can have on healing (Barco, 2021, p. 193). Overall from the studies it was found that there are beneficial aspects of being a part of self-defense programs.

Although there are spaces where martial arts is seen as a positive and impactful tool, there are also places and mindsets that can be harmful. Within studies regarding participation, the women who have not been or are no longer a part of the martial arts space are not represented (Maor, 2018, p. 37). This is important to acknowledge that their voices might not be within existing literature, but it also does not discredit the voices of the women who do share their involvement in martial arts spaces. The way individuals perceive and experience sport is not going to be the same (Michelini & Schreiner, 2022, p. 2). Additionally, certain spaces within martial arts do not feel safe for women and some women choose to train with only women as a result, or not train at all (Barco, 2021, pp. 173-174, 193). There are also critiques on women's self-defense classes being falsely advertised as empowering and overemphasizing the impact a course can have (Morgan, 2020, p. 11). This is why it is necessary to critically evaluate the types of moves and the way techniques are taught.

All of these sources were important and brought to light many factors to consider. However, one of my favorite sources was the autoethnography of a woman who was a former asylum seeker turned refugee who began training in martial arts after her family was displaced. Soolmaz Abooali acknowledges that her experience is not prescriptive or representative of the experiences of all refugees or displaced persons (2022, p. 510). She explained her time training in martial arts through a sensory lens, which refers to the ways the body's senses can create meaning (2022, pp. 507-508). Based on her experience and the exploration of sensory learning, Abooali argued that martial arts has the unique ability to facilitate "creative risk and tension in safe spaces" (2022, p. 512). Abooali suggests "safe spaces are highly significant given that they

act as a means through which refugees can express themselves outside the confines of their realities" (2022, p. 518). The scholarly perspective and autoethnography Abooali published is influential in this field because it helps to fill in one of the research gaps mentioned earlier, with embodied experiences. She even suggests at the end that the study makes a case for the value of sensory and embodied experiences of the refugees and asylum seekers within sport-based programs. "A compilation of refugee and forced migrants' accounts of this nature might prove to be useful for further analyses and comparisons toward understanding how to work in meaningful ways with refugees and forced migrants" (Abooali, 2022, p. 519). Abooali's emphasis here points back to the significance of adapting programs based on the context and perspectives of participants, working alongside them and truly listening to what is said.

Conclusion of Literature Review

Although sport is a powerful force, it is not always positive and there are many sport programs within literature and society that have been "ineffective, counterproductive, or even misused" (Hartmann & Kwuak, 2011, p. 6). There is a warning throughout the literature to use caution when designing programs and make sure to do so *with* participants and to *listen* to participants, rather than seeing them as objects to receive such programs. There is also an emphasis on not stereotyping people based on their legal status of migrant, refugee, or asylum seeker. Martial arts is a sport that has been researched, but the impact of each program depends on the participants, the motivations one has for training, the style of gym, as well as the instructor. A martial arts program that is going to work with migrants and displaced people needs to be able to listen to participants, plan with them, adapt to community needs, and carefully analyze the impact.

PROGRAM DESIGN

This research project gave me the opportunity to explore how a self-defense program teaching migrant and displaced populations can work, while considering it heavily from a scholarly perspective and analyzing existing studies. The concept of reflexivity was an important aspect in being able to analyze and interpret the limitations, assumptions, expectations, and reactions that I had during the research process from my position as researcher (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023, p. 244). My hope and driving purpose behind this project was to offer a self-defense class that would be a safe space for migrant and displaced women to learn if they chose to. There are two organizations in particular, The Sister's Club and When We Band Together, that inspired me in how to design the self-defense classes.

Inspiration

Ramla Ali is a professional British-Somali boxer who founded The Sisters Club in 2018. This nonprofit was designed "to provide a free weekly boxing class for women; a safe space where Muslim sisters could train with or without their hijabs, without ever fearing discrimination" (Ramla Ali Sisters Club, n.d.). The Club emphasizes the importance of solidarity and provides a safe space for Muslim women to train, for women who have suffered domestic abuse, for any woman who wants to be a part of the solidarity, or for any woman who wants to learn to defend themselves (De Casparis, 2023). As a former asylum seeker, Ali is well aware of the challenges displaced women face and uses her platform of boxing to promote solidarity and well-being for women of all backgrounds. Ali is a Muslim woman who hid boxing from her family for a long time because it was considered immodest, but she loved the sport (Moshakis, 2018). Ramla Ali is a role model for so many women and has created a safe space to offer

boxing and other sports. The nonprofit is inspiring because of the community focus built upon providing accessible sport for women. It is incredible to hear the stories of the women who attend the various locations of the Sisters Club and how passionate they are about it.

When We Band Together (WWBT) is an organization based in Lesvos, Greece and works to provide a holistic approach for the women and children living in a nearby refugee camp. Their program came up when researching existing self-defense classes for refugee women. Their website shows they have multiple programs at their center that are focused on education, health, and safety. These programs include language learning, therapy, music, mindfulness, self-defense, and other sports. They focus on both body and mind growth as well as providing a safe space for the women to come during the day (When We Band Together, n.d.). Learning about a self-defense class that is hosted weekly for refugee women was inspiring and helped me to think through the importance of having a holistic approach. I also had the opportunity to do a Zoom interview with Mariza Hahathaki, the Submanager and Human Resources Coordinator, to learn more about WWBT programming, specifically the weekly self-defense. Although the interview occurred after the self-defense classes had already begun in San Diego, it was extremely insightful and helped me to understand important concepts of teaching self-defense to vulnerable populations, like displaced women. WWBT is a much larger self-defense program than this study and works with a different population of women living in refugee camps, but the simple overlapping concepts were important for me to hear.

Mariza shared with me the purpose behind WWBT offering self-defense classes is to empower women to be able to defend themselves, to feel strong, and to feel safe. One of the most significant things she shared was how many of the women do not understand that defending themselves is considered a human right. As a result, the emphasis is on connecting with the

women through both the movement offered in the classes and utilizing focus groups to work through the mental aspect of having the right to defend themselves. When asked about the evaluation process of this program to determine its impact, Mariza shared that it is extremely difficult to have a formal evaluation process because of how transient the population is. Lesvos is the first stop for many asylum seekers and refugees before they continue on to another location, so the primary way they measure impact is by having conversations with the women during or after classes. Mariza added that the classes are "not for every woman's taste" but the "students who participate are very passionate about it." When asking about one of the most significant parts of the program, she shared "women who seem so close to themselves and shy, I see them flourish when they do these movements" (M. Hahathaki, personal communication, November 29, 2023). It was helpful to talk with someone who oversees an established self-defense program as a part of a bigger holistic program to think about how to model something similar in San Diego.

Outline of Classes

After accumulating knowledge from existing programs, I decided to partner with an existing organization to ensure this class had the best outcome and could be best measured. The primary model was WWBT because they offer self-defense classes every week for women who attend the center, but they also provide many other valuable programs for the women to participate in. However, the accessibility and empowerment aspects from The Sister's Club were important to consider too. The desire was to be able to offer the classes at a location in San Diego that was more holistic than just providing a standalone self-defense class. The existing literature emphasized that a holistic approach is much better when working with vulnerable

communities (Amara et al, 2005, p. 4; “Right to Play,” 2008). The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is an organization working in over 50 countries that helps “to restore health, safety, education, economic wellbeing, and power to people devastated by conflict and disaster” and they “fight for a world where women and girls have an equal chance to succeed” (International Rescue Committee, n.d.). The IRC offices in the United States offer a multitude of services for people resettling after displacement such as housing help, legal aid, small business development, education opportunities, and many more. The San Diego office of the IRC has a Women’s Resilience Center (WRC) that I had the honor of working alongside to host self-defense classes. Women who access the programs of the WRC are migrants or displaced persons, many of whom are current or former refugees or asylum seekers. Partnering with the WRC allowed for a similar holistic approach to WWBT because it is a space for women who are migrants and provides multiple program options, such as language learning and yoga.

Initially the classes were going to just be offered to refugee women, but as explained in the definitions section, it was important to not “label” people by their situations. I chose to not have them clarify their legal status any further than what was known based on the clients the IRC works with, because it would not have necessarily impacted their interest or experience in the self-defense classes. Not all refugees or asylum seekers have the same exact life experience and should not be lumped together. While this may seem counterintuitive to expand the group to any migrants and displaced people rather than having a narrower label, my reason behind this is to further emphasize the humanity of the women. Yes some of the women may have a really difficult story of displacement, but at the same time they are much more than the label of refugee or asylum seeker, and that was not the primary point of this project or what they should take away from the class experience. “The discursive linkage of the category of ‘refugee’ to such

depressing circumstances contains the risk that we fail to see the ‘normality’ and agency of forced migrants and that research reproduces stereotypes” (Bakewell, 2008, and Spaaij & Oxford, 2018, as cited in Spaaij, Broerse, et al., 2019, p. 13). The emphasis here lies in the importance of a strengths-based approach as opposed to a deficit-based approach. A strengths-based approach views and values capabilities, resources, knowledge, and potential, rather than the deficit-based approach which looks primarily at weaknesses (Pattoni, 2012; Spaaij, Broerse, et al., 2019, p. 13). Focusing on strengths does not mean ignoring challenges or struggles that individuals have, but rather not limiting them based on circumstances (Pattoni, 2012).

When speaking with Katie, the program coordinator of the WRC, about the possibility and logistics of offering a series of self-defense classes for women, she shared with me necessary factors to consider. These factors included the languages the classes would be offered in, the space to hold the classes in, religious needs, and the timing of the classes. The self-defense classes were scheduled for Thursdays from 10:30 am to 11:30 am on November 2nd, 9th, 16th, and 30th, with the skipped week being the week of Thanksgiving. These classes were advertised by a flier and distributed by Katie through the WRC What’sApp group chat. The group chat, with 162 people including admin, is made up of women clients (those who access resources from the IRC) in San Diego who want information or already access services through the Women’s Resilience Center. The fliers were also shared with other programs at the IRC in San Diego.

The focus was to primarily teach self-defense skills for these classes because it was only going to be offered for four weeks, which is too short of a time to fully dive into martial arts. Self-defense is important to learn and tangible even if people only attend for a couple weeks. When thinking about offering these classes and the curriculum that would be taught, it was really

important to make sure the program was beneficial to participants. I worked hard to combine what I have learned about teaching martial arts during high school, working with the refugee community during previous volunteering and internships, as well as what I learned about existing programs of martial arts with vulnerable populations during my literature review. For the self-defense classes at the WRC, the focus was on moves that would be the most practical if someone needed to defend themselves. The emphasis was on defending different potential attacks and learning moves that can be used in order to get oneself out of the situation. A consultation with my martial arts instructor helped identify the best types of techniques to teach for a short series of self-defense classes.

My assistant for the classes, Cybil, has also trained in martial arts and earned a black belt. She provided help in teaching these classes by holding targets and helping me demonstrate the self-defense moves. Over a span of five weeks we taught participants bearhug defenses, wrist grab defenses, boxing, kicking, punch defenses, choke escapes, and takedowns. Each week the techniques were mixed up to create a curriculum that would be well rounded and teach a variety of moves. In a more simplistic way of explaining through text, the moves taught focused on how to escape a situation if someone were to grab someone either by wrapping their arms around the body, grabbing the wrist, or choking the throat. After demonstrating the moves, my assistant and I would ask the women if they were comfortable with practicing and then we would grab the women so they could practice getting out of different situations. We also covered how to avoid punches and how to counter them in a way that would allow temporary hindrance to get out of the situation. One of the emphasis points throughout the classes was to remember vulnerable spots on a person's body to be able to target those if the attacker is much bigger or stronger. The priority with these classes was to teach moves that would be fairly easy to remember in a variety

of potential scenarios so participants might have the skills to defend themselves if needed. I also acknowledge that learning self-defense does not mean people will automatically be able to protect themselves in any situation, but it can better equip and hopefully help if needed.

METHODS

Participants were briefed about the topic of research at the beginning of their first class and had to sign a consent form before participating in the class. The names and identities of the women are kept anonymous for their safety and privacy, therefore all of the names in this paper are fictitious. This research had a mixed methods approach with questionnaires and observations being the primary methods of gathering data. When talking with Mariza from WWBT, she shared that surveys and formal methods of evaluation for their self-defense program are difficult to get substantial feedback from because some women only come a couple of times before moving, some only come once, and others come nearly every week (M. Hahathaki, personal communication, November 29, 2023). Since there were only four classes with participants for this study and new women came most weeks, it would have been unrealistic to compare the pre and post questionnaires to get substantial data, which was the original plan. Observations from the classes collected data about body language and comments made during class, which were taken note of after each class and double checked by the assistant. Utilizing a mixed method approach allowed for the opportunity to gather information from the questionnaires, what was said during class, and what was observed while teaching. All of these factors were significant in being able to accurately analyze the self-defense classes and the ways women participated and responded to the information.

Before classes began, it was decided that the questionnaires would be printed only in English because the people attending would either be proficient in English or speak Dari and there would be a translator present. The pre-questionnaire had some questions with multiple options to check off and some that were open ended. The questions with options included a Rosenberg self-esteem scale, age range, length of time in the United States, previous martial arts or self-defense experience, reasons for taking the class, reasons for attending the WRC, and words that remind them of confidence. The open-ended questions asked participants to define in their own words what self-esteem is, what safety means, first thoughts when hearing self-defense or martial arts, and what inspires them. During the first week when participants were filling out the consent forms and pre-questionnaires, the WRC facilitator, Nazi, who was also the translator, told me that some of the women were not comfortable answering the open ended questions. Out of the nine women who attended the classes, eight total pre-questionnaires were filled out and only two of them answered the open ended questions. One adjustment made to the methods was adding another week of class on December 7th. The reason for this was because no participants came to the correct location during the third scheduled week, so one more class was added to have four classes with participants attending, resulting in five total weeks.

A significant part of programs working with vulnerable populations is making sure the impact is actually positive, not just perceived to be. This is why it was important to get feedback from all of the women who participated and why it was essential to adjust the format of the post-questionnaires. The Rosenberg self-esteem scale was removed from the post-questionnaire because it was evident the classes would not shift responses since all of the women answered high the first time and if there were any changes it would not be influenced heavily by the self-defense program if women only came once or twice. The format was changed to include

Likert scale questions, asking to respond from a range of strongly agree to strongly disagree, rather than just open ended questions. This was done to hopefully collect more substantial data for feedback at the end of the five weeks. The statements for the Likert scales were: “I enjoyed taking these self-defense classes,” “These self-defense classes helped increase my self-esteem,” “I feel more confident after taking these self-defense classes,” and “I think more women should learn self-defense.” The post-questionnaire also asked participants about the favorite skill they learned, if they would be interested in more classes, if the results were what they were hoping for, and if they would be willing to participate in an interview. Most of these questions were yes or no answers, but there was space for the women to explain their answers if they chose to.

Only one person attended the final week of class and filled out the questionnaire in person, so the extra forms went to Katie and she sent them out to anybody who participated in at least one of the classes. She contacted the women through What’sApp to get their feedback and emailed me the responses once people shared. Six women responded over What’sApp which resulted in seven total women providing feedback. Three of the responses were in narrative format while the other four were in the format of the post-questionnaire, shown in Appendix B. Allowing the women to respond over What’sApp gave them the opportunity to share their responses in whatever way they felt most comfortable and for them to share in their native language, which is important and worked better than the pre-questionnaires. Although there were three women who said they would be interested in an interview on their post-questionnaire form, it did not work out to conduct any due to time constraints.

The data gathered from these methods was important, yet there were limitations within this project and the methods. First, the amount of time to host these self-defense classes was restricted based on the length of time for this research project and it would have been beneficial

to have more than five weeks of classes, especially since there were only participants for four of the weeks offered. Having more weeks would have allowed for more depth of feedback, especially if women are able to attend multiple classes. Many of the questions from the pre-questionnaire did not turn out to be as significant to the research as I thought they would be. In hindsight, it would have been good to print out the forms in Dari as well, or to have women fill out the forms through What'sApp or online. I believe the significance of information in the post-questionnaire had a lot to do with the fact that women could respond in their native language and not worry about writing out the answers or even following the form provided. Further data could have been gathered from interviews and having more classes offered.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

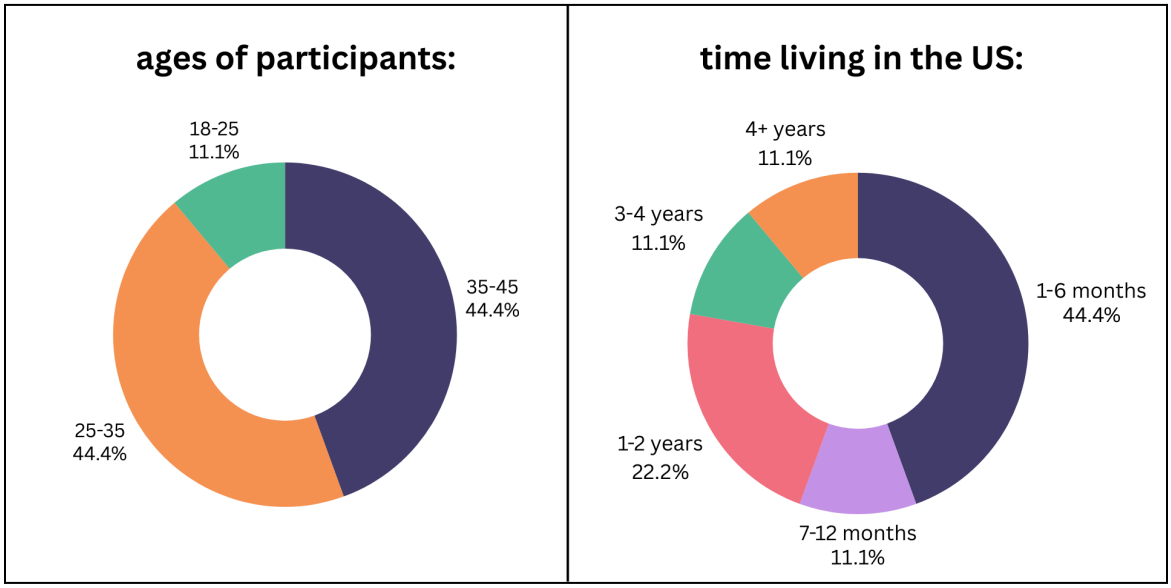
First and foremost, the findings from these self-defense classes are not generalizable to an entire population of people, but that does not mean the data is not important or the women did not benefit from the classes. The data is not generalizable in the same way that the lived experience of a migrant or displaced person cannot be generalized. Martial arts, similar to any other sport, may be an enjoyable thing for some people and not for others. Although I think it would be beneficial for more women to know self-defense and train in martial arts, I also recognize this belief is reflective of my experience within the martial arts space and acknowledge that not all training places are synonymous with the philosophy of teaching or levels of support or affordability. The desire behind teaching these classes was to provide a safe space for migrant and displaced women to learn self-defense skills for free and to remove barriers that might otherwise prevent them from participating. It is important to emphasize the cultures and backgrounds of the women are not the barriers, but self-defense and martial arts programs in

general are not always designed with migrants in mind, which in turn creates barriers of attendance. The number of women that attended the classes was not enough to do a quantitative analysis, but the qualitative data received is still significant.

There were nine total participants over the span of the five weeks the classes were held. Seven of the women had migrated from Afghanistan and primarily spoke Dari, which is why instruction was assisted by a translator. The other two women that attended had migrated from Haiti. Although only two out of the nine pre-questionnaires were fully filled out due to the participants stating they preferred not to answer the open ended questions, the beginning part of the pre-questionnaire (yes/no questions and check boxes) provided a better understanding of the women who were attending. Participants ranged from ages 18 to 45 and had been living in the United States anywhere from one month to over four years. Figure 2 shows this data in pie charts. Figure 3 shows the reasons why women came to a self-defense class and why they attend the Women's Resilience Center, which was also gathered from the pre-questionnaire.

Figure 2

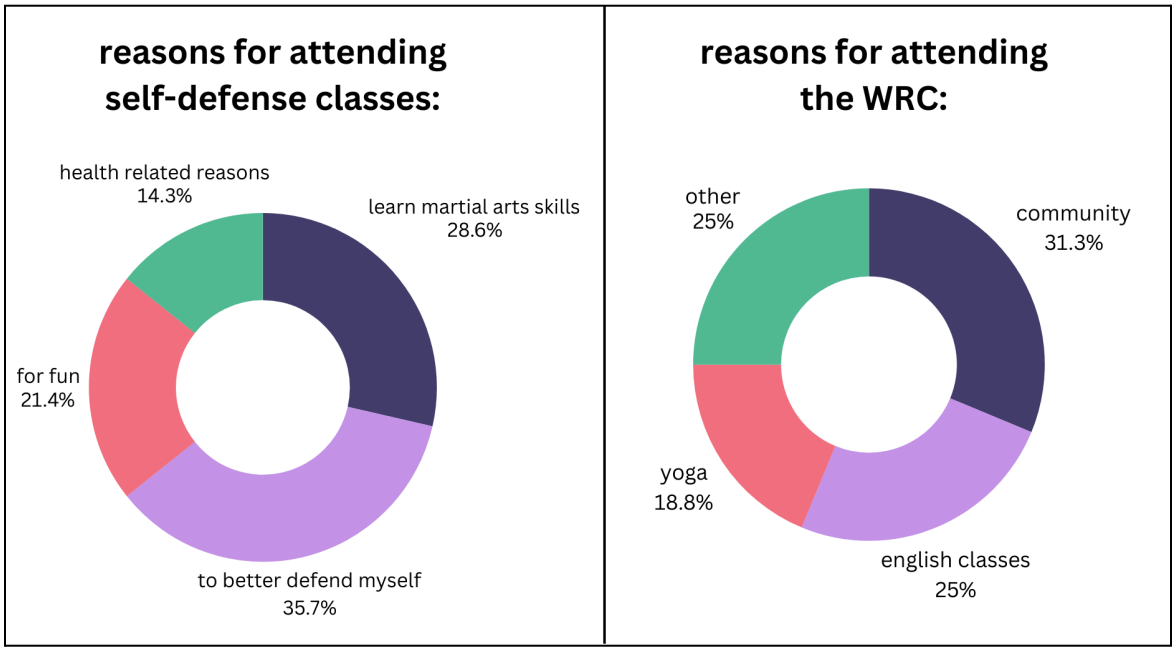
Pre-Questionnaire Data - Age & Time in the US



Note: These pie charts include data from all nine women, even the one who did not fill out a pre-questionnaire.

Figure 3

Pre-Questionnaire Data - Reasons for Attending



Note: This data is from the eight total pre-questionnaires. Participants were able to select more than one option for each question.

The data from pre-questionnaires gave a good overview of the women participating in the self-defense classes. Figure 4 below shows the breakdown of what weeks participants came to the classes, if they came to multiple, and who they came with. This is to visually show the attendance and connections to people having other family members come or showing up to the class with a friend. Week two had the most participants and some brought their young children. The most consistent woman came three weeks and for two of those weeks, her mom sat in the

room and watched her take the class. Week three shows two participants who tried to come to class, but they ended up going to the IRC office in City Heights rather than the one in El Cajon where the classes were held. There were a couple of women who came to the class with a friend, as shown with the curly line between dots. Out of all the women who attended across the five weeks, only two women came by themselves.

Figure 4

Attendance Across Weeks

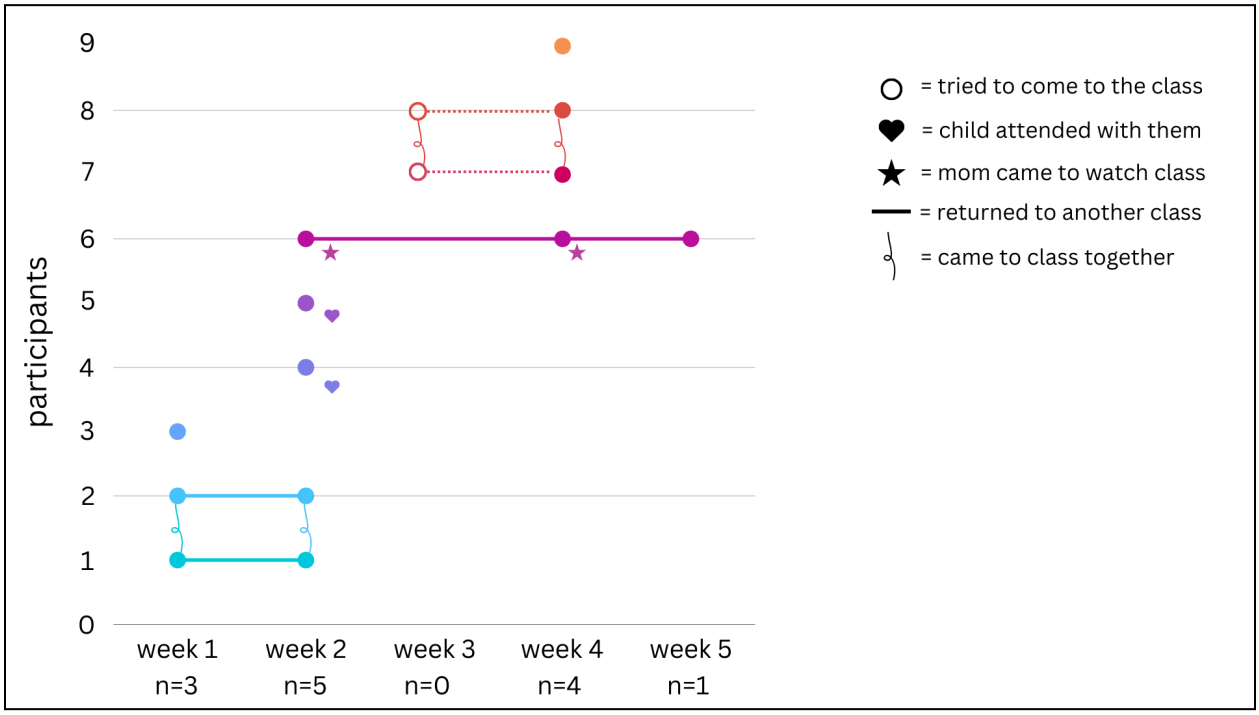


Figure 5 below shows a word-cloud that was created based on words women said and observations made. These words came from comments women made in the class, statements on their post-questionnaire feedback, or concepts that were observed while teaching. Through analyzing all of the data, the overarching themes of comfortability, community, and accessibility continued to show up. These themes were what emerged as the essential elements when teaching

martial arts or self-defense classes to migrant and displaced women. The following section expands on these themes and the ways they were evident through teaching the self-defense classes at the Women's Resilience Center. Appendix A has a detailed explanation of each week of class and the participants who attended.

Figure 5

Word-Cloud

Comfortability

Comfortability in a new space can either be immediate or take time. Specifically in martial arts or self-defense, it can take a while to get used to practicing moves when people first begin. This is something I have experienced personally, seen through classmates, and noticed as an instructor as well. At times, people are too uncomfortable with martial arts and choose to not continue participating. It can be uncomfortable to practice defending oneself from an attack,

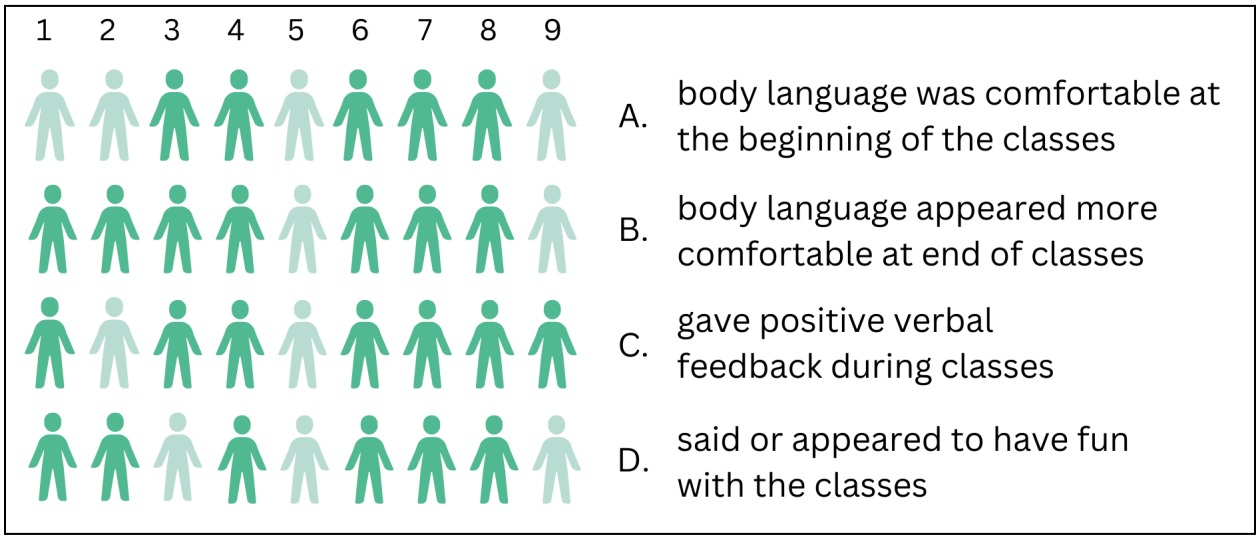
because for many people this could have been a reality. It also may not be natural for certain cultures, for example women who come from patriarchal societies and do not know they have the right to defend themselves, like Mariza shared with me (M. Hahathaki, personal communication, November 29, 2023). An example of this occurred during one of the weeks when a woman messaged Katie through What'sApp saying "we are not comfortable with this" in response to a message about the self-defense class. However, as mentioned earlier in my conversation with Mariza from WWBT, self-defense might not be something every woman enjoys learning about or participating in, but those who do seem to absolutely love it. Sharmeen, a new facilitator at the WRC, shared something similar based on her experiences while working in Greece when some people chose not to participate in certain mindfulness activities simply because they did not want to or did not find it worthwhile. This is true for myself and most people can also probably relate; sometimes there are things that might be good for us but we choose not to participate for a variety of reasons and that is okay. As much as I believe all women should know self-defense, it is not something that should be forced upon anyone either.

During these classes, observing the body language of participants helped identify their comfortability with self-defense. There was a range of confidence and comfortability levels when participants first arrived, which could be attributed to emotions in the moment or personality. Some women were timid at the beginning, some were forward or outgoing, and the rest were in the middle. These observations were based on posture, where they were standing, and if they were talking much. One of the women, Saliha, was immediately ready to practice when she stepped in the room; she took off her shoes, removed her hijab, and stepped onto the mat. She had previously practiced self-defense and it was evident in how comfortable she was in the space right away. Throughout the weeks, there were four women who were not the most

comfortable when they arrived at the class, as seen in Figure 6. This was evident in how close they stood to the door and wall when they first walked in. Two of them appeared more comfortable as the class continued and even began to have fun learning, proven by their laughter, smiles, and comments about having fun. This was similar to what Mariza had said about the program at WWBT, "women who seem so close to themselves and shy, I see them flourish when they do these movements" (personal communication, November 29, 2023). A specific example of this was when Makai's movements were soft and gentle at the beginning, but slowly they became more firm and strong which shows the progression of comfort during practice. All nine of the women gained confidence in various ways through practicing their self-defense moves as the class time went on, which was evident by either striking harder, practicing the moves faster, or seeming less hesitant when practicing. The growing confidence and comfortability was also shown by the three women who came to more than one class when they had joy on their faces while recalling techniques from the previous week.

Figure 6

Comfortability Pictogram



Note: The darker colors signify that the statement is accurate for that participant.

Figure 6 shows that participants 5 and 9 appeared to be the least comfortable, but their feedback at the very end was significant in showing their interest and enjoyment of the classes. The post-questionnaires helped determine comfortability because the feedback either supported the observations made or provided information that was not clear based on body language and comments made during class. Farhat, participant 5, answered yes to all of the post-questionnaire likert scale questions; enjoying the classes, increasing self-esteem, feeling more confident, and believing women should learn self-defense. Nadira, participant 9, shared this feedback: "I learned a lot and really enjoyed the self-defense class; we learned what to do in a bad situation. and we learned different techniques like boxing, kicking, and other defense techniques if something happens on the way or somewhere we can defend ourselves. Thank you." Although it was not clear from an observational standpoint whether they were comfortable with the classes, it was more evident after reading their feedback.

Safe Spaces

Safe spaces contribute significantly to the comfortability of participants, especially when learning new things. A safe space is essential in creating room for learning well and the potential for empowerment (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014, p. 4). Imagine a scenario where one wants to learn but does not feel safe, when that happens, the ability to learn decreases significantly. Most of the years of my martial arts training have been at gyms that feel safe and foster an environment for learning and empowerment. However, one gym I attended for about a year was quite the opposite and did not feel like a safe space, especially being a woman. It made a huge difference in the ability to be comfortable and learn when training at a place where I was

underestimated and sexist comments were made frequently. I tolerated it for a while because it had the most convenient class times for me to be able to train, but the desire to go and participate was never there and often left me very frustrated and sometimes humiliated. This is not a unique experience and there are plenty of martial arts spaces that do not do a good job of creating safe spaces, particularly for women.

As mentioned in the literature review, sport is often used for development and social change, but this does not immediately indicate "positive community outcomes" (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014, p. 2). Sport programs need to consider the importance of creating or maintaining a safe space in order for participants to feel welcome and comfortable. For the self-defense classes taught at the WRC, creating a safe space for women, and more specifically for migrant and displaced women was a priority. Sociocultural safe spaces emphasize that all should feel welcome and supported regardless of race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or age (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014, p. 6). Specifically for these classes, it was important to focus on cultural and religious safety in addition to the general aspects of creating safe spaces. The IRC and the WRC both do a great job of making all people feel welcome and the emphasis on sociocultural safety is evident in the work they do. This is why partnering with the WRC was important for this self-defense program to have the best possible outcome. An essential factor of creating a safe space was offering the classes to only women and covering the windows to have a fully closed space. For both cultural reasons and comfortability reasons, this was an important aspect and will be elaborated further in the accessibility section.

Since all of the women who attended were already familiar with the WRC, they could trust that it would be a safe space for them. It was significant that the facilitator and coordinator of the WRC also participated in the classes because they were familiar faces for the women who

attended the classes. Not only did their presence help facilitate a safe space, but the translation done by Nazi was essential for many of the women there and provided further feelings of sociocultural safety and belonging. As the instructor of the classes, I worked to maintain a general safe space by checking in with participants frequently if they had questions, asking if it was okay to grab them in order to practice moves, reiterating if they were not comfortable doing a move that it was okay for them to say no, and encouraging them with their moves. It was important for the women to provide consent before and during the time practicing, in order for them to be most comfortable and for a safe space to be maintained. The women participating nurtured a safe space by encouraging one another during practice, supporting each other by coming to the class together, and fostering a fun learning environment with laughter and joy. Ophelia, who attended week four, laughed a lot during class and even said "this is fun!" while learning how to escape from a chokehold. Having a comfortable safe space bridged the gap between a serious subject matter and the ability to have fun while learning the content.

Recommendation

The comfortability factor was essential in creating and maintaining a space that felt safe to learn self-defense. One recommendation to any future sport program working with migrants and displaced people is to learn about their background, listen to what they want out of the program, and have them help to create it if possible. As the instructor of the program, it was important to know sociocultural factors that create a safe space and the specifics of the population of women that would potentially attend. Another aspect of helping to facilitate comfortability was partnering with an existing organization to make sure participants were familiar with the employees and location, especially when learning something as serious as being

able to defend oneself. Lastly, people learn in different ways and have different personalities. While comfortability can often be observed, it is necessary to hear the thoughts of participants.

Community

A Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) is a theory that is useful in exploring what it means to be a part of a community, especially when looking at the diverse communities and migrants living in new areas (Buckingham et al., 2018, p. 3). McMillan and Chavis' conceptualization of Sense of Community is the most commonly used and consists of four components: "*membership,* a feeling of belonging to the community; *mutual influence*, an ability to impact the community and vice versa; *fulfillment of needs,* a perception that association is beneficial; and *shared emotional connection*, a feeling of connection to the community and its members" (as cited in Buckingham et al., 2018, p. 3). The Women's Resilience Center provides a space for many women living in the El Cajon area to be a part of a community that understands them well, meeting the *membership* and *shared emotional connection* components of the sense of community. The WRC was "designed in collaboration with participants that is both a place for refugee and immigrant women to make friendships day-to-day, as well as engage in emotional support groups and learning opportunities" (International Rescue Committee, 2021). The space for emotional support and learning opportunities relates to the *fulfillment of needs* component. Additionally, it is important that the Center was established alongside participants so they can have agency and share their opinions on what they would like the WRC to be for them, as well as contributes to the *mutual influence* component. Five of the women in the pre-questionnaire specified that one of the reasons they attend the WRC is for community. The WRC does a great job of fostering a safe space and community for women to be connected to one another and I

witnessed that first hand through the friendships the women had with one another and the familiarity they had with the facilitators and coordinator who work at the WRC.

There were a couple of weeks when participants came with a friend to the classes, which showed the importance of community in showing up and trying new things. Makai and Sahar arrived to class together for the first two weeks and Weslia and Ophelia came together for week four. When reflecting on my own life, it is easier to try new things when friends are with me and many people feel the same way. In the data and interviews collected by Fuller and Lloyd, it appeared that social and community factors were considered important by women when learning martial arts (2019, p. 72). Katie even mentioned friendships as something she has noticed in other programs as well, where sometimes women do not attend if they will not know anyone or cannot go with anyone. A couple of the weeks there was a lot of conversation amongst the participants and it was clear the women knew each other. Although I do not speak Dari, their comfort and friendship with one another was evident through the way they spoke with one another and their body language. The weeks where people did not seem to know each other as much still felt like a community because of the commonality of the WRC and desire to learn self-defense. During one of the weeks there were some women who were from Haiti and some from Afghanistan, so they did not share the same cultural background or language, but the class was a place where they were learning next to one another and supporting each other during their practices.

One of the most important factors of this class was that the women were already familiar with the IRC and the WRC because of other services they offer. This was referenced in the comfortability section as well because there is an overlap in the ways that community should lead to comfortability and vise-versa. The factor of trust and community was essential for the

classes to work well, because they are what created and maintained the safe space. The community factor was emulated by the fact that the WRC employees decided to take the classes as well. They were familiar faces to the women who came which created a more welcoming environment because they knew the names and stories of the women, whereas my assistant and I were just meeting them for the first time. Throughout these weeks of self-defense, it was evident how important community is and how it impacts comfort and encourages learning. It was heartwarming to see the ways the women would cheer each other on when practicing because it created a more welcoming and safe space. Anjoom showed a lot of support for others' learning and would cheer people on whenever they practiced the move correctly. The women would watch one another practice in a way that was engaged and supportive.

Recommendations

The community factor was beautiful to witness and impacted both comfortability and accessibility. Again, the significance of partnering with an existing organization allowed for community to be present before the self-defense classes were offered. This relates back to the holistic approach and offering a sport program alongside other programs for migrant and displaced people. The data for this project was qualitative and had a smaller sample size, but further research could be expanded for larger programs or working with women from other countries. This research was not limited to women from specific countries, but the findings might have been slightly different as a result of working with women from other cultures. The Sense of Community would be defined as the four same components, but they might show up in various ways based on the culture, organization, and participants.

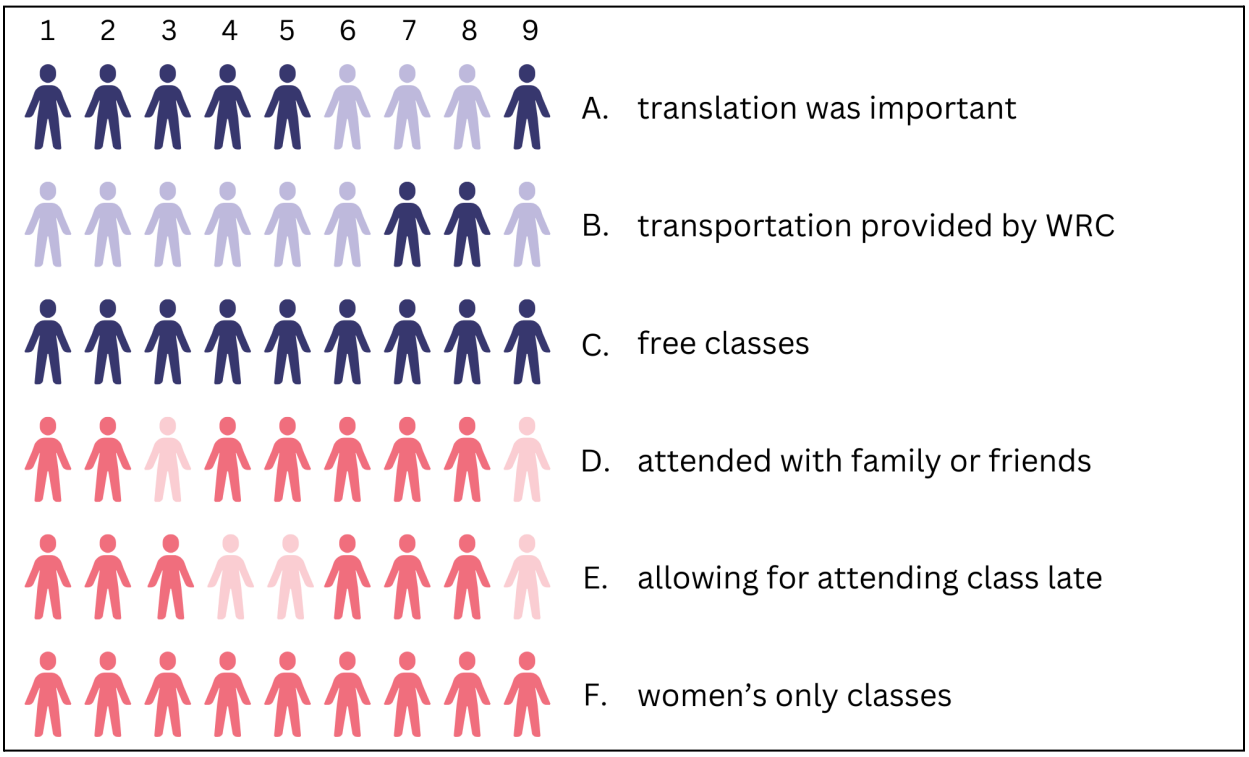
Accessibility

Accessibility is another essential element found in the effectiveness of the self-defense program offered. Although attendance is typically a key factor in tracking progress and effectiveness of a program, it is not the only critical factor to look at. Participants cannot attend classes if they are not made accessible to them. Accessibility is "the practice of making information, activities, and/or environments sensible, meaningful, and usable for as many people as possible" (SeeWriteHear, n.d.). Accessibility will not necessarily be the same for all things and all people, but the particular needs of the user are important to pay attention to at all times, especially when designing in relation to usability, context, culture, and equity (SeeWriteHear, n.d.). Without intentionally planning and being aware of specific needs, accessibility is likely not going to be accommodated for. This is why there are studies within the literature of sports and displaced populations that discuss "the need to understand the target groups' culture, needs, and context, importance of low financial cost, geographic proximity, and flexible delivery, the need to transfer decision-making power in programming to the target group, engagement of families, building facilitators' intercultural competences, and gender-segregated provision" (Spaaij, Broerse, et al., 2019, p. 11). Another study specifically mentions how access to martial arts is not equal and therefore can prohibit people from training (Fuller & Lloyd, 2019, p. 106). These self-defense classes would not have worked well had these factors not been considered in the specific ways to make the classes more accessible to the women who participated. This meant looking at both potential barriers of attending general self-defense or martial arts programs as well as observing the ways that attendance was supported throughout the program.

The WRC knew certain factors that would ensure the self-defense classes were accessible for as many women as possible, based on their previous experience running programs and eliminating any potential barriers. This looked like having a translator, providing transportation if needed, considering timing of schedules, offering free classes, as well as considering cultural and religious details. It is important to note that the cultures and religions of the women were not the barriers to attendance, but they were important factors to consider when designing a program for women to be able to freely participate in. Nazi, one of the WRC facilitators, was able to translate the classes for any of the women whose native language was Dari. Six of the nine women were able to learn self-defense because translation was available for them, as shown in Figure 7. When deciding on the timing, the WRC was aware of the times of day that often do not work well for women to attend, usually based around the school times of their children or other programs that are offered at the IRC. Using this information, the classes were planned at a time to hopefully accommodate the most women. Transportation was another consideration and the WRC was able to provide a Lyft for women if they needed it, which Ophelia and Weslia used. Mitigating these timing and transportation barriers is considered an aspect of "safe mobility," one factor of what makes a safe space (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014, p. 9). Part A, B, and C in Figure 7 shows the various ways women were impacted by eliminating the potential barriers to attendance.

Figure 7

Accessibility Pictogram



Note: The darker colors signify that the statement is accurate for that participant.

Figure 7 also shows the ways that attendance was supported, in D, E, and F. Coming to the classes with friends or family was one of the ways attendance was supported, which also ties in with the importance of community. Some of the family members that attended were young children who came with their moms. During week two, there were young children that came to the class, which made it accessible to the moms. For two of the weeks, Anjoom's mother watched her participate in the classes. Lastly, the ability for participants to arrive to class late supported attendance. The gym I grew up training at did not allow students to join when they were late unless they had a really good reason as to why they had showed up late. If this were to be implemented during the classes offered, only three students would have been in attendance throughout the weeks because most of the women showed up a little bit late. However, this is a

cultural factor as Katie shared with me that many of the women showed up late to the other programs as well.

Women's Only Classes

Having women's only classes was an essential factor in the effectiveness and accessibility of the self-defense program. Katie shared with me during the planning process that many of the women who attend the WRC practice Islam, which meant classes would need to be in a closed space with only women. A study done by Taylor and Toohey (2002) heard narratives from women that "suggest that many Muslim women experience considerable difficulties accessing programmes and services that meet their religious requirements and consequently feel systematically constrained in their recreation participation" (as cited in Amara et al, 2005, p. 16). With those factors in place, participants who wore hijabs were able to loosen or remove their hijabs if they chose to do so. During week one this was evident when Saliha immediately removed her hijab once she entered the space. Makai and Sahar, also during week one, slowly loosened their hijabs as the class continued. Makai shared that she had been looking for something like these classes, with only women. A significant component of accessibility is that women could attend as a result of no men being there and they had the freedom to loosen or remove their hijabs if they chose to do so.

Not all migrants or displaced women are Muslim and not all of them have the need for religious considerations. However, seven out of the nine the women who attended the self-defense classes migrated or were displaced from Afghanistan, which is a predominantly Muslim country. The area of El Cajon where the WRC office is located, is an area where many Afghans have resettled. The two women who are from Haiti lived in City Heights, another area

of San Diego that is known to have a lot of Haitian resettlement. This points back to the importance of knowing more about the background of the women participating in self-defense programs, especially when working with migrant and displaced women. Although Ophelia and Weslia were not Muslim, the women's only classes still provided them a space to learn in a safe environment. Ophelia mentioned in her post-questionnaire that she would be interested in taking more classes "because it's was very interesting and important to learn about how to defend ourselves if something happened with us like a girl."

Recommendations

Accessibility is essential in making sure to take into account all the possible barriers preventing attendance and recognizing the ways attendance can be supported. For programs working with migrant and displaced people, it is essential to evaluate the typical program offerings and then design it in a way that will be accessible to people based on cultural and religious considerations. However, it is important to not view culture and religion themselves as the barriers to participation but the way programs are often not designed in accessible ways. One way of ensuring this is to partner with an organization that knows the participants or to know more about the people the program is being offered to.

CONCLUSION

The heart behind this whole project was to see how a self-defense program could be designed for migrant and displaced women. Partnering with the Women's Resilience Center was the key component to be able to gather information beforehand about the women who would attend and to design the classes in a way that was accessible to what they need. I learned

valuable experience teaching these self-defense classes and will continue to teach with the WRC, as long as it is something the women desire to learn more about and the continued evaluation is positive. Although teaching these self-defense classes began with the question of empowerment and impact, the results from questionnaires and observations helped determine essential elements of teaching self-defense or martial arts to migrant and displaced women. Comfortability, community, and accessibility were the themes that recurred throughout the research process, both in literature and in experience. These components were discovered by listening to what the women had to say and compiling all of the data together to see the overarching themes. These classes were not perfect, but this research can be a guide to developing similar future programs and recognizing the essential factors that need to be considered when designing and implementing the program.

The importance of seeing recipients of a program as people, and not projects, cannot be emphasized enough. Just because migrants and displaced people are in a vulnerable population does not mean they do not have strengths, knowledge, and insight. They need to be included in the work and feedback is really important, whether formal or not. Based on existing literature and the experience of teaching these classes, I believe sport can be a meaningful tool but it cannot be the means to an end, especially in terms of development or social inclusion. This is why it is important to utilize sport within a holistic context and deeply analyze programs to ensure the outcome is what participants want. Finally, it is important to continue to review programs as time goes on and get feedback and ideas from participants frequently to make sure the program is effective in providing participants with their desired outcome.

Appreciation

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APPENDIX A

Week by Week Observation Notes

Week One

Week one was scheduled to be 10:30am-12pm to account for an extra 30 minutes with the pre-questionnaire, but because the questionnaire did not take long, participants arrived late, and we went through all of the curriculum quickly, the class ended up running from roughly 10:45-11:50am. When the first two women arrived together, I introduced myself and my assistant Cybil, as well as shared about the research, which the facilitator translated for me. We began the class with the two women and the two WRC employees who were helping to coordinate and translate. I invited the women onto the padded mats Cybil and I had brought to practice on. The women seemed hesitant at first but as the class went on they appeared more at ease and with each move we practiced they demonstrated increased strength. Another woman came in roughly thirty minutes into the class, but she was ready to go right away. We paused briefly for her to fill out the consent form. Since she joined late, we continued from the curriculum we were teaching and briefly retaught moves we were building upon. The eagerness the women had to continue onto the next technique and learn more caused us to progress through the moves pretty quickly. At the end, we ran out of planned moves, but improvised and added one more technique that would be somewhat easy to learn and could be built upon the following week. After the class, printed flyers were provided to participants to remind them of the future times and days of the next classes. All of the women who attended this class were Afghan.

Week Two

During the second week, a couple of women came close to the scheduled start time. There were more women who had communicated they were on their way through What'sApp, so we waited until they arrived. Two of the women during this week brought their young kids. The kids were running around in between people during the warm up, but once we started actually practicing techniques, the coordinator tried to keep them occupied with coloring and activities on the side of the room. Makai and Sahar, who attended week one, came again for week two. At the beginning there was a woman who came in, but chose not to participate and shared that she was waiting for her daughter to come. Her daughter arrived partway through the class and was around my age. We paused briefly for the consent form to be filled out and then continued the class. This class, with five participants and the two WRC employees, was a little bit tight in the room we had, but we made it work. To be transparent about the data collection, it was difficult to gather observational data because there were five people attending the class, with two little kids, the two WRC employees, and then my assistant and I teaching. With eleven people in the space, focusing on everything that was happening while simultaneously teaching was not easy and I recognize that it may have had an impact on the amount of data collected for this week. At the end, printed flyers were provided to the new participants to remind them of the future times and days of the next classes. All of the women who attended this class were Afghan.

Week Three

It was drizzly for the third scheduled week and nobody ended up attending. Katie had scheduled for a woman to be there to watch any kids that come if necessary. Cybil and I waited about thirty minutes to see if anyone showed up. As we were waiting, Katie said she knew one of the ladies would not be able to attend since her foot was hurting. She was also sharing how

participants sometimes do not show up to the classes the WRC hosts and it can be for a variety of reasons, such as not knowing anyone else going. After we left, Katie sent an email saying two women tried to come, but went to the IRC office in City Heights instead of El Cajon.

Week Four

With no one attending week three and then Thanksgiving before the fourth week of class, I was a little worried about people showing up, especially because it was raining. However, someone showed up right away and Katie was working on ordering a Lyft for the two women, Ophelia and Weslia, who had gone to the other IRC office during the previous scheduled class time. Week four was the only one out of the five week period where the women were not all from the same country or spoke the same language. For all of the other weeks, the women were from Afghanistan and spoke Dari. This week, there were some Afghan women and two Haitian women who spoke English. At the end of this class, when asking the women if there were any particular moves they would want to learn, they all just said they wanted to learn more.

Week Five

Before anyone arrived for the final week, I was talking with the coordinator and a newly hired facilitator, Sharmeen. Katie shared with me that one of the women had messaged saying she was bummed but would not be able to come due to her son having an appointment. This week, my assistant was not able to make it to the class which meant I needed to demonstrate how to do the self-defense moves on someone else, which ended up being Katie. It was a good week for only one participant, who understood English fairly well, to come because Nazi was not able to make it this week to offer translation.

Makai

Makai attended week one and two of the self-defense classes, both times with her friend Sahar. Neither of them had taken martial arts or self-defense classes previously, but joined for fun and health related reasons (pre-questionnaire). This is an example of the importance of *friendship* and *community* in *supporting attendance*. There is a sense of comfort in trying new things with friends. During the first week of class, Makai looked a bit nervous but excited at the same time, based on how much she was smiling. She understood a good amount of English and has been in the United States for 1-2 years now. Her primary reasons for attending the WRC were for the community, English classes, and yoga classes (pre-questionnaire). Her previous experiences with the WRC were important to contributing to *comfortability* and *community* elements. Before class and at the beginning, Makai seemed a bit unsure of what to do. The stretches we did were new and slightly unusual for both her and Sahar to practice. When we switched to kicking, Makai was very gentle and I had to remind her it was okay to hit the kicking target harder. The more we practiced, the more firm her strikes became and showed the progression of *comfort* within practice. After we did a warm up, I asked if they wanted to take a quick break for water and Makai's response was that she wanted to use the time well and learn more. As the class continued, Makai opened up more and began re-explaining the techniques in her own words. This showed her growing *comfort* and the importance of a *safe space* as a way of creating the room to learn well (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014, p. 4). Her reiteration of the concepts showed she was learning and wanting to engage. Whenever she was able to reiterate a technique right or do a move correctly the first time, I could see the glimmer of pride in her eyes. Throughout the class time, Makai began to slowly loosen her hijab and she shared that the class

was something she had been looking for, with only women. This is a significant component within *accessibility,* that Makai could attend as a result of no men being present and had the freedom to loosen or remove her hijab if she chose to do so. At the very end of the first week, Makai said the class was really fun and the moves we learned were what she was hoping for when coming to this class.

Makai returned to the self-defense class for the second week and appeared a little bit more reserved during this week, which could have been a factor of the kids running around or more people attending. While learning new moves, Makai was standing more on the sidelines of the room and it was hard to tell if she was disengaged because she was not interested, or if she was on the sides because of how many other women there were. However, when we reviewed moves we had practiced during week one, her face lit up. She was smiling and practicing the move in the air at the same time as I was demonstrating.

Sahar

Sahar attended with Makai in the first week. She was very smiley and seemed excited, but at the same time nervous and not sure what to do. Similarly to Makai, Sahar attends the WRC for community, English classes, and yoga classes. She chose to participate in the self-defense for fun and health related reasons (pre-questionnaire). The *accessibility* factor of translation was important for Sahar to get the most out of this class, since she speaks Dari. She did not talk a whole lot throughout the class and has only been living in the United States for 1-6 months. She attended the classes with Makai who has been here longer than a year and their friendship was an important factor in *community* supporting class attendance. A couple of the moves at the beginning, like stretching and kicking were slightly difficult for Sahar to do, but she kept her

smile the whole time. Her kicks were low to the ground, but she hit the targets powerfully. As the class went on, Sahar began to practice the moves better as she became more familiar with them and she seemed proud of herself while at the same time she was calm. She would nervously laugh after completing some of the moves, but she stayed strong with her movements. Around the same time Makai began to loosen her hijab, Sahar also began loosening hers, showing her *comfortability* within the space of *all women*. At the end of class, when I was sharing with them about the future classes, Sahar was not saying much but she was smiling a lot and appeared excited about next time.

The *community* element was important during both weeks for Sahar in attending. She came with Makai again during the second week and she was more talkative with the women she knew during the second week. It was clear that Sahar and Aziza were friends from the way they interacted before the class began and talked with one another in Dari throughout the class. Sahar seemed much more engaged and *comfortable* during this class as a result of the *community* of people she was familiar with. Some of the moves were still slightly difficult in practice, but Sahar remembered the moves well from week one. When she remembered the moves, I could tell that she was happy with herself.

Saliha

Saliha arrived for the first week of class about 45 minutes after it was scheduled to start. She came in a little flustered and it was translated to me that she had been looking for the class at the wrong area of the IRC office. She was over by the normal WRC space, but we were using the citizenship classroom because it had tables we could easily break down. As soon as Saliha came into the room, she took off her shoes, removed her hijab, and stepped onto the mat. We took a

brief pause for her to fill out paperwork before continuing with the classes. She was ready to go right away and had taken some self-defense classes before (pre-questionnaire). Her previous exposure to self-defense or martial arts made her immediately more *comfortable* within the space, since she somewhat knew what to expect. With Saliha coming in late, I retaught a couple of key moves that were needed for the portion we were practicing when she arrived. She engaged strongly with the techniques and learned quickly, again showing her *comfort*. She was fairly quiet throughout the whole class time and I could tell she was serious in her practice. Her primary reason for joining the class was to better defend herself (pre-questionnaire). When leaving at the end of the class, Saliha said it was useful and good to learn the moves. She gave her feedback in narrative form, rather than the post-questionnaire, when the series of classes had finished. “Hello, my opinion about self-defense class is completely positive. Every woman should have the ability to resist and learn about self-defense in order to be able to defend herself in some necessary situations.” Her feedback shows the significance in learning how to defend oneself from possible scenarios.

Aziza

The first woman who came in during the second week arrived with her three year old son and a friend. As Aziza was filling out the forms, her son was rolling around on the mat on the floor. He was very energetic and was rolling for roughly ten to fifteen minutes as paperwork was being filled out and more people arrived. Aziza talked with the other women who came in and seemed very *comfortable* in the space and with the people, showing significance within the *community* that attends. She has been living in the United States for 7-12 months and came to the class to better defend herself and for health related reasons (pre-questionnaire). The kicks were

physically difficult for Aziza to practice and her clothing kept getting in the way and causing her foot to get caught. When we moved into practicing a throw, she decided to sit out and this is when I found out she was pregnant. However, after a couple of other participants practiced throwing my assistant, Aziza decided to join in and did a good job with it. At the end, she asked if there would be more classes and I shared through translation about the next couple of weeks and the potential for more if people are interested. She then said in Dari that she would bring her child back once born, and would want to continue the classes. Her response to the post-questionnaire was in narrative form; "I joined the self defense classes one time, it was very useful. It is really important for a woman to be familiar with self defense. I really enjoyed the class, however my son is not calm. I love self defense. I am pregnant but still I joined a session. I am very interested to join again once I give birth to my baby." Aziza's emphasis on how important and useful she found the classes was significant to hear.

Farhat

Farhat attended week two of the self-defense classes with the desire to learn how to better defend herself (pre-questionnaire). She was quiet and so was her daughter, who was probably four years old and came with her. Aziza's little boy was pestering the little girl and made her cling to her mom even more. The daughter wanted to hold the mom's hand during the warm-up, which made it harder for Farhat to fully participate, but the fact she was able to come with her daughter indicated *accessibility*. Farhat's body language seemed slightly disengaged, but when she was practicing the moves she did them firmly and was serious. During one part, she chose to sit out from practicing one of the moves. It was a throw and was one of the most complex moves taught during the course of the four weeks. Although her *comfortability* did not appear to be very

high, the classes offered a first exposure and based on the post-questionnaire, Farhat enjoyed the classes which helped increase her self-esteem and confidence. She also agrees that more women should learn self-defense.

Anjoom

Anjoom came in late to the class, but was ready to go right away. We paused to have her fill out the consent form, but she ended up not filling out the pre-questionnaire form at all because of timing. She was eager to learn and would ask for the demonstration to be repeated so she could follow it clearly. She volunteered to be the first to practice some of the moves after they were demonstrated. Each time Anjoom practiced, she was methodical in her motions and would talk through the steps to help herself.

Similar to the first class, Anjoom came again during week four quite a bit later but she jumped right in and picked up the movements fast. During boxing, she asked me to repeat the demonstrated moves and was very focused to make sure she was going to be able to do them right. The first time she practiced boxing she was slow and very thoughtful, but picked up speed and power each time. At the end, she asked if there would be future classes and was super interested in coming back.

Anjoom came in around 10:45 am for the fifth week of class, 15 minutes after the start time, and was confused as to why no one else was there. I noticed her enthusiasm to learn was similar, but confidence in volunteering to go before the WRC employees was less than it was in the bigger groups during previous weeks. Anjoom recalled most of the moves we had learned in previous weeks. Her face lit up when she realized that she knew the next step and she was also able to teach the coordinator and facilitator the next part of the move when they were stuck.

When the WRC employees were practicing moves, Anjoom would cheer them on by clapping or help them out by telling them the next move if they were unsure. She showed a lot of support for others' learning, emphasizing the importance of *community.* At the end of class she talked about how useful these classes have been and that she thinks all women should know self-defense. She said she loved the classes and wanted to make sure there would be more in the future, she was very vocal about it and repeated it multiple times. I talked with her more after the class ended about what else she had going on that day and we got to talking about how her family is from Afghanistan and has only been in the United States for three months, so although she did not fill out the pre-questionnaire, I got to know a little more about her. During the post-questionnaire she shared that the results were what she was hoping for and said "I want to join this class and hope it will not finish." She also said "I love this class and it learns me a lot of thing for keep my self from danger. I think all of the women have to join this class, it's useful and helpful for feature [future]."

Nadira

The first person to show up during the fourth week was Nadira. She was shy at the beginning and was unsure of what to do while waiting, standing pretty close to the wall and the door, which showed the lack of *comfortability* when first arriving in the space. Since she was new to the classes and we knew other participants were on their way, I taught her some moves from previous weeks to show her some of the basics while we were waiting. She came to class to learn martial arts skills and has practiced before (pre-questionnaire). Nadira attends the WRC for the community, English classes, and yoga classes (pre-questionnaire). She has been in the United States less than 6 months and the *accessible* class with translation was important for her learning.

Although she was a smaller woman, she had a lot of strength when practicing the techniques. She was quiet throughout the time but was clearly engaged and wanting to learn. Nadira shared this feedback: “I learned a lot and really enjoyed the self-defense class; we learned what to do in a bad situation. and we learned different techniques like boxing, kicking, and other defense techniques if something happens on the way or somewhere we can defend ourselves. Thank you.”

Ophelia

Ophelia and her friend Weslia tried to attend week three of the classes, but ended up at the wrong IRC location, so I am thankful they were able to come again during the fourth week. *Community* and *accessibility* were important elements for her attendance. Arriving with a *friend* was one way attendance was supported. Additionally, the WRC paid for their Lyft to get to the class, which reduced a transportation barrier and is considered “safe mobility” (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014, p. 9). They came from City Heights and are both from Haiti (pre-questionnaire). In the pre-questionnaire, Ophelia shared she came to the class to better defend herself. One of the open-ended questions asked “What does safety mean to you?” and her response was “Go out. Running out really faster without danger” (pre-questionnaire). I would agree that safety is leaving dangerous situations while also recognizing that may not always be possible, which is why learning how to defend yourself is also important. Ophelia reiterated this in the post-questionnaire saying she would be interested in more classes “because it’s was very interesting and important to learn about how to defend ourselves if something happened with us like a girl.” During the class, Ophelia asked many questions to clarify moves or make sure they would work. This allowed me to expand on certain concepts and showed that she was

comfortable enough in the space to ask questions. She was engaged in learning and taking in all of the information. She laughed quite a bit during the class and seemed to have a lot of fun with it. She even said "this is fun!" as we were learning how to escape from a choke against the wall. Having a *safe space* to learn in is important to bridge the gap between serious subject matter and still having fun with the content and *community* around. In the post-questionnaire, Ophelia expressed interest in coming to future classes if they are offered and in response to the question "were the results from the classes what you were hoping for?" she responded, "Yes, because I learned many different forms to help myself in a bad situation."

Weslia

Weslia came during the fourth week with Ophelia, after trying to go during the third week. She has been in the United States for less than six months and joined the class to learn martial arts skills, to better defend herself, for fun, and for health related reasons (pre-questionnaire). Just like Ophelia, *community* and *accessibility* were important for Weslia to be able to come to the class. Weslia's body language was very relaxed from the beginning and was at ease throughout the time. She picked up on the moves well and did them at a pace that worked well for her. When we practiced the boxing techniques, her body movement had a similar rhythm to that of dancing the way she moved her shoulders and head. Her familiarity with dance translated into the *comfortability* with the movements of boxing and attributed to her comfortable body language. Weslia made jokes throughout the class and she and Ophelia were having a fun time. The aspect of fun relates to *comfortability* and a safe learning environment. During the post-questionnaire, Weslia said she would be interested in more classes "because it is

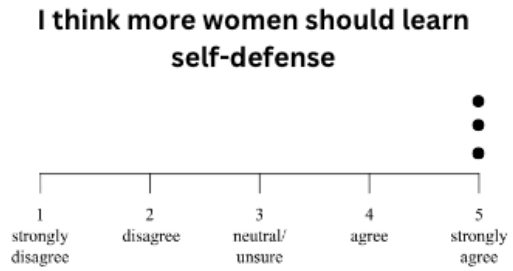
important to know how to stay safe.” The results from the classes were what she was hoping for and said “only thing I wish more student had come. These are really helpful.”

APPENDIX B

Post-Questionnaire Data

Likert Scales:

(Note that one participant responded "yes" to these instead of responding on the likert scale.)



Open Ended Responses:

If offered, would you be interested in taking more classes like this in the future? Why or why not?

- "Yes. I love this class and it learns me a lot of thing for keep my self from danger. I think all of the women have to join this class, it's useful and helpful for feature [future]" - Anjoom
- "Yes because it's was very interesting and important to learn about how to defend ourselves if something happened with us like a girl" - Ophelia
- "Yes because it is important to know how to stay safe" - Weslia

Were the results from the classes what you were hoping for?

- “Yes” - Anjoom
- “Yes, because I learned many different forms to help myself in a bad situation” - Ophelia
- “Yes” - Weslia

Is there anything else you would like to share? Anything that would make future classes better?

- “I want to join this class and hope it will not finish” - Anjoom
- “No, it's okay. If they start another class, I would like to participate again” - Ophelia
- “Nothing else only thing I wish more student had come. These are really helpful” - Weslia

Narrative Responses:

“Hello, my opinion about self-defense class is completely positive. Every woman should have the ability to resist and learn about self-defense in order to be able to defend herself in some necessary situations” - Saliha

“I joined the self defense classes one time, it was very useful. It is really important for a woman to be familiar with self defense. I really enjoyed the class, however my son is not calm. I love self defense. I am pregnant but still I joined a session. I am very interested to join again once I give birth to my baby.” - Aziza

“I learned a lot and really enjoyed the self-defense class; we learned what to do in a bad situation. and we learned different techniques like boxing, kicking, and other defense techniques if something happens on the way or somewhere we can defend ourselves. Thank you” - Nadira