

Towards the Making of a 'New Woman'

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Her Own Hero: The Origins of the Women's Self Defense Movement

By Wendy L Rouse

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Women's self-defense training is often traced back to the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s in the US in which self-defense classes doubled as consciousness-raising sessions. Strict gender boundaries have always confined women to the domestic sphere. Women have always faced severe societal sanctions that limited the degree and type of their activities- self defense specifically boxing is one of them. In *Her Own Hero*, the author digs deeper by locating the movement's birth in the 1910s and 1920s. In this era, women across the country, mostly white and urban-dwelling took up boxing and jiu-jitsu with the specific purpose of warding off male attackers. White men tended to be suspicious of these lessons and sought to frame them as needed only in response to deviants and non-white threats but the training helped kick-start conversations about genuine threats even in the private sphere especially at home.

Wendy L Rouse's work has evolved through years of research, paper presentations and discussions, but also her personal learning and teaching of martial art. The author has looked at women of different colors in the Anglo race. The women's self defense movement arose simultaneously with the rise of the physical culture movement, concerns about the strength and failure of the nation, fears associated with immigration and rapid urbanization and the expansion of women's political and social rights. Women started taking up self defense for various reasons that ranged from personal defense from stranger attacks on the streets to rejecting gendered notions about feminine weakness and empowering themselves. Wendy Rouse has focused on boxing and jiu-jitsu and saw it as a reflection of and a response to the larger women's rights movement and the campaign for the vote given the political scenario at that time. She has

showed that initially women who were trained in boxing and jiu-jitsu were predominantly from middle or upper class and Anglo. However, alongside, working class, non-white, immigrant women also learned the art from the upper and middle class women who advocated for them. Yet boxing emerged from, and was a large part of the culture of the working class.

The book is divided into five chapters, an Introduction and a Conclusion with pictures of different types of defense movements by women. The book begins with surveying of the roots of the women's self defense movement in the physical culture movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It has explored the aspects of class, race, masculinity and boxing to set the stage for women's entry into the male world of combat sports. While establishing the context of the book- the author has shown that the physical culture movement has encouraged the transgression of class boundaries, as men and women of the upper class studied sanitized elements of working class fighting sports. For working class men and women this became a passage of upward social mobility. Further the author has brought in the framework of imperialism, manliness and the future of the white race in understanding the broader historical context of American jiu-jitsu training. Moreover, she has explored the claims to public space by learning jiu-jitsu. The author has portrayed how, for these women, self defense represented a means of exercising their right to safely access public spaces. However, critics have played an important role in the work as they have criticized the art of boxing as not being feminine and questioned the empowerment through self defense. The author has taken into account the interpretations of scholars, psychologists and advocates to ensure a diversity in understanding of the art. The book further examines the broader cultural and political implications of women's self defense and considers the explicit connections between the physical and political empowerment during that time. It has challenged the existing gender stereotypes and countered the myth that men were natural protectors of women. At the same time, women's rights advocates recognized the significance of this new bodily empowerment and linked it to the larger campaigns to challenge oppressive patriarchal structure. Women became more confident after this new movement. The author has termed this transition as being towards a 'New Woman'.

The most important and interesting aspect of the book not only explores the possible danger that prevailed in the public sphere but also similar danger that was present in the private sphere. Beyond social and political implications, the book also talks about violence against women at

home. Apart from dangers on the street, self defense advocates also understood that women were also attacked at home by their relatives or an intimate partner which was found to be more widespread than attacks on the streets. The women's self defense movement thus came to symbolize the fight against gender oppression in public and in private. During that era women who trained in and advocated self defense found a way to make the political physical by empowering their bodies through self defense. Few scholars have specifically examined or even acknowledged the efforts of this generation of women in pursuing of boxing and jiu-jitsu as a means not only of self defense but also of expressing their personal and political power. Through self defense training, women deconstructed femininity and myths about feminine weakness thus by constructing a new image of women who is powerful and self reliant. Their bodies became resistance against the oppressive system. Although their individual motivations varied yet their collective action has echoed through the century. The women's self defense movement demanded women's emancipation from constricting barriers that prevented them from exercising their full rights as citizens and human beings.

Her Own Hero is interesting, engaging, cross cuts, and makes important contributions to the scholarly literature on the history of gender, the history of feminism, and early 20th century, U.S. history. Wendy L Rouse has insightfully reconstructed the strategies that proponents of women's self-defense employed to counter assertions that self-reliant women were masculine and deviant.