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Confidence With a Kick: Helping Jordanian Women Defend Against Abuse

The first self-defense academy for women in Jordan, SheFighter gives women and girls the confidence to stand up against harassment and domestic abuse in a country where gender-based violence often goes unpunished.

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Each month at SheFighter academy in Amman, Jordan, around 150 women learn a combination of taekwondo, boxing and self-defense techniques to help them gain the confidence to stand up to harassment and abuse. [Elspeth Dehnert](#)

AMMAN, JORDAN – On the fourth floor of a discreet office building in Jordan's capital, a group of women and girls are being told to punch and kick, punch and kick. This is no exercise class. For many of the women, it's a chance to change their lives: they are learning to defend themselves against the widespread gender-based violence in their communities. The company that runs the class, [SheFighter](#), is technically a self-defense academy for women. But founder Lina Khalifeh considers it the start of a movement.

“I have to empower all women in the world,” says Khalifeh, 32, as she leans against a bright pink wall, a common color theme throughout her studio. “I want to see an army of women everywhere just from SheFighter.”

But before she takes things global – a goal that seems feasible, considering she recently trained actress Emma Watson in Canada – Khalifeh is determined to make a lasting impact in her home country of Jordan, where women are routinely subjected to abuse in the home and harassment on the street.

“We motivate women from the inside to start standing up for themselves,” she says. “One person can’t really change laws in Jordan, but if you have the whole female community asking the government to change a law, I think they would consider it.”

SheFighter was just an idea in 2009, when Khalifeh – a 20-time martial-arts gold medalist – began training women in her parents’ basement. She had recently found out that her college friend was being abused by her father and brother, and her instinctual reaction was to teach women how to fight back. Three years later, she made things official by moving her underground passion project into an aboveground studio space. Since then, she has armed roughly 12,000 women and girls with the mental and physical strength they need to be able to fend off encounters like the ones her friend had to endure.

“It’s mostly self-confidence,” says Khalifeh of SheFighter’s core lesson. Every month, around 150 students learn a combination of taekwondo, boxing and self-defense techniques for real-life scenarios like, “What’s going to happen if three men attack you?”



SheFighter founder Lina Khalifeh was inspired to start training women when she discovered a friend had been abused by her father and brother. (Elsbeth Dehnert)

Khalifeh tells the story of a former student who used her SheFighter skills to stop a man from raping her in an elevator. “She kept on pushing him and hitting him hard until he escaped,” she recalls, adding that the student chased the man down the street until the police arrived. While the perpetrator did end up in jail, Khalifeh says the sentence was reduced after her student had no choice but to drop some of the charges against him because she stood up for herself. “The policeman said to her, ‘Well, you were hitting him, too.’”

Still, the student’s case turned out better than most in the country, where there is no guarantee of jail time for men who harass, attack or even kill women, especially when the act is committed in the so-called name of honor.

Hadeel Abdel Aziz, executive director of the Justice Center for Legal Aid in Jordan, has supported hundreds of victims of gender-based violence over the years. She says that, while verbal and sexual harassment are prevalent in the streets of Jordan, the country’s No. 1 issue regarding violence against women is domestic violence.

A 2012 survey funded by the Jordanian government found that out of the roughly 11,000 married women interviewed

across the country's 12 governorates, 32 percent had experienced emotional, physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of their spouses. And of those, 22 percent reported having endured one or more forms of violence over the previous year. One in two women said they had never sought help or even disclosed to anyone the violence they had experienced at home.

Aziz says many women are simply too scared, too dependent on the abuser or too mistrusting of the legal system to come forward and press charges. Even if they do file a complaint, she adds, there are a lot of steps that need to be taken before protection is enforced and justice is served. While Jordan did pass a domestic violence law in 2008, women's rights activists continue to criticize it for its restrictive definition of domestic violence and emphasis on reconciliation over the protection of women's rights.

"The system needs a lot of strengthening, whether it's encouraging more women to come forward or how we actually process the complaint," says Aziz. "There's still a lot of men who go unpunished, and they're likely to get away with it."

We're not weak. If I see [my students] cry, I'm really hard on them: 'You need to go to the bathroom, wash your face, and get in the training room right now.' With time, they feel more empowered.

Khalifeh is well aware of the systemic impunity – it's something she hopes to help change by inspiring women to protect themselves, in the home, on the street and in the legal sphere. But, ultimately, she wants to stop gender-based violence and harassment from happening in the first place. And she thinks providing women with the confidence to break free of the submissive role that society has placed on them is one way to do that.

"We're not weak," says Khalifeh. "And if I see [my students] cry, I'm really hard on them: 'You need to go to the bathroom, wash your face, and get in the training room right now.' With time, they feel more empowered."

Dania Natsheh, 18, has practiced and, now as a coach, preached this philosophy at SheFighter for the past two and a half years. After reading about the self-defense academy online, she enrolled in the program as a way to get over her debilitating shyness and fear of walking alone outside. Watching her pummel the punching bag while wearing SheFighter's trademark pink gloves, it's difficult to imagine her ever being that afraid.

"When you live in a community that's wanting to control you, it's hard," she says. "So I needed to gain the confidence to be able to defend myself and know what to do in certain situations."

While she's been fortunate enough not to have had to use the physical training she's learned at SheFighter, Natsheh has at times tapped into the emotional and mental skills to stop harassment on the street. "Sometimes you just need to say the right word to them to shut it down," she says of the men who make crude comments to her or follow her in their cars. "Other times, it's a look or a walk with confidence that will keep them away from you."

Khalifeh's mission is to help every girl and young woman find that confidence, one at a time. And, to her, that is how you build an army of change.

"Twenty years from now, I want to see branches all over the world," says Khalifeh. "Yeah," she continues, as if lost in her own thoughts. "It's a movement."

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