

Self-defense classes offer women real survival mechanism

NGO WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS WAYS TO RESPOND TO VIOLENCE

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BEIRUT: When Christelle, 25, was attacked one evening a few years ago, she literally froze with fright.

"I had my earphones in when the guy grabbed me from behind. He tore my bag off and tried to drag me away. I was so shocked by what was happening that I couldn't react. I could hardly even breathe," she said.

Unable to find her voice to scream or the strength to physically defend herself, Christelle (not her real name) is certain she would have been raped that night if the noise of an approaching car hadn't scared off her aggressor. "Now when I look back at what happened I wish I had done something to try and protect myself, instead of acting like a spectator to my own attack," she said.

Aware that many people do

not know how to react when confronted by violence, Senshido International held a workshop in Beirut on Sunday highlighting ways to react to potentially violent situations, de-escalate confrontations and survive violence.

Unlike martial arts, which are often based on elaborate and unfeasible moves, Senshido uses simple strategies to help individuals survive real-life violence, said Georges Fahmy, Senshido International's director of operations for the greater Middle East and workshop leader.

Proceeds from the high-energy workshop were donated to KAFA: Enough Violence and Exploitation, an NGO dedicated to eradicating gender-based and family violence, child abuse and human trafficking.

Ghida Anani, program coordinator at KAFA, said Senshido appealed to the NGO's core values. "It's very related to our

work on empowering women, on avoiding and refusing all forms of violence, and at the same time changing the perception of being a victim to that of a survivor," she said, adding that KAFA hoped to organize free self-defense classes in the future.

No statistics exist in Lebanon about the number of people violently attacked by strangers, but gender and family-based violence is widespread, Anani said.

Violence against women is "the most pervasive yet least-recognized human-rights abuse in the world," according to the United Nations. One-third of all women have at some point been forced into sex, beaten or otherwise abused, usually by somebody they know, the World Health Organization has said. Domestic violence kills or disables more women than disease, war or car accidents.

Lebanon is no exception, with

every woman at the workshop relating experiences of sexual harassment or violence. The Lebanese penal code actually works in the favor of perpetrators of gender-based violence by not recognizing marital rape as a crime and forgiving rapists if they propose to their victims. Furthermore, it remains somewhat of a taboo to talk openly about domestic violence. "As a woman in Lebanon, you should be prepared for anything," said one participant, Maha.

One of the more gruesome techniques Fahmy taught was "The Shredder," which involves sticking one's fingers in the eyes, nose or throat of your attacker. So will the workshop's participants be putting their newfound skills into practice? "If I need to, yes," said one woman. "But I hope I never have to."

KAFA's around-the-clock helpline is 03 018 019