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## Waging a battle against sexual and domestic violence

Women will never achieve equality as long as they are treated as "the frail sex in need of strong men to protect" them.

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Women are trained from childhood to be wary of strange men - even though most assaults are perpetrated by men known to their victims [AFP]

Women in combat isn't news. As President Obama [said](#) in his State of the Union address last night, "[w]omen have proven under fire that they are ready for combat."

Until now, we haven't been sent to the front line, although women in the US military have fought and died in Iraq and Afghanistan. The front line has come to us - on a bus in New Delhi, at a demonstration in Tahrir Square, on a hike to get water in Congo, or even inside our own homes.

We've been living in dangerous situations in which we are forced to fight, without training, tanks or weapons, on the uneven battlefield of sexual and domestic violence.

The only strategies we've been taught to use when attacked are retreat and surrender, but employing them never leads to victory.

Neither do the precautions we're admonished to take: "dress defensively", "don't go out at night", "don't go out alone", or "don't go out at all". We're not, typically, told not to stay at home, unless that's where we're attacked, in which case we're asked: "why didn't you leave?"

Women are trained from childhood to be wary of strange men - even though most assaults are perpetrated by men known to their victims. Girls and women are warned about widespread sexualised violence, but we, as a society, continue to act as if it doesn't exist. If, or rather when, women are attacked, we are blamed for the assault or told it was a "random act of violence" having nothing to do with gender.

After a man jumped me from behind, beat and raped me, and [left me for dead](#), I made it to a nearby house where, initially, no one believed my story. They thought I must have been hit by a car. When I managed to persuade them that I was attacked by a man, they said, "It couldn't have been anyone from around here." I learned the next day that my assailant was a 25-year-old man who lived across the road.

I also learned he had been in the military and had been trained in hand-to-hand combat. I had no self-defence training and so, like most victims, I initially froze. Retreat was not a possibility. So, I pleaded. I said I'd do whatever he wanted.

There is, however, no way to surrender to avoid a rape. There's no convention like waving a white flag. In fact, giving up the fight is often taken to be an invitation to carry on and, later, evidence that the victim "wanted it".

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Even saying "no" and trying, without training, to defend oneself can be pointless. When I fought back, I was hit with a rock and strangled into unconsciousness. And yet my assailant said I had invited the attack. Had the circumstances been different, a jury might well have believed him.

I've been an advocate of self-defence training for girls and women for more than two decades. I think it should be required in schools. And now that women are eligible for combat roles in the military, if men are required to register for Selective Service, women should be, too.

It is hard for me to say this because I am anti-war and aware of the crucial role played by women in the struggle for peace. But not only does the military need women; women need access to the combat training and skills provided by the military - and to the first-class citizenship that being eligible for combat confers in our country. As Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said, in announcing the lifting of the ban on women in combat, it is "the responsibility of every citizen to protect the nation".

In 2008, people questioned Hillary Clinton's ability to be Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, simply because she is a woman. This won't be possible in 2016. And it is no coincidence that a movement to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment has arisen again, since one of the main arguments against it the last time around was that, if it passed, women would have to be allowed to serve in combat roles in the military and would be drafted if men were.

Granted, allowing women to serve in combat and requiring them to register for Selective Service won't, in isolation, lead to women's equality. But these steps would increase all civilians' engagement with, and sense of accountability for, the wars our country fights. They would give women more say in how, or whether, these wars are waged.

Women will never achieve social and political equality as long as we are treated as the frail sex in need of strong men to protect us. From whom? Other strong men?

President Obama is right: "Valour knows no gender." But, unfortunately, violence does. My hope is that levelling the battlefield will mean fewer battles - at home and around the world.

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