

Translated excerpt

Andrea Böhm
Fighting Like a Woman.
Die Geschichte der Frauen, die zurückschlagen

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The Women Who Strike Back

Translated by Zaia Alexander



Andrea Böhm

"Fighting Like a Woman: The history of women who hit back"

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PREFACE

The Kick Queen of Beirut

The inspiration for this book was sparked by a woman's kick to a man's privates. The incident occurred on October 17, 2019, in the Lebanese capital of Beirut, during the mass protests against corruption and nepotism. A minister's convoy was stuck in the middle of a demonstration; a bodyguard got out of the car and fired his rifle into the air. A small, slender woman stepped out from the crowd, bent her left leg, and dealt him a perfectly-aimed kick to his privates.

Dozens of people had photographed or filmed the moment. A few hours later, the protester was crowned the "Kick Queen" on social media and heroine of the protests. The scene was shown as graffiti on buildings; the videos and photos went viral. I downloaded one of the images and stared at it constantly, while growing more and more intrigued. The location, time, and context have faded. Yet, what remains are the contours of an unarmed woman attacking a considerably larger, gun-toting man with all her might.

Images of violence are usually jarring because they depict brutality and humiliation; oppression of the weak by virtue of laws, weapons, aggression, or physical strength. The image from Beirut moved and fascinated me for its power to disrupt the very foundation of a pivotal power dynamic in recent human history: the male monopoly on physical violence.

Here we are in the 21st century; female superheroes on the big screen are beating male villains to a pulp, women compete in all forms of martial arts, and women soldiers are deployed on the front lines. Yet Wonder Woman, female Olympic boxers, and female bomber pilots have done little to shake the belief that in the fight against gender inequality, there are two seemingly immutable constants: women are physically inferior to men and males are predisposed to being aggressive. Apart from a woman's capacity to bear children, these are the central criteria for dividing humans into two genders. Despite the fact that fertility is the only biological feature, all three continue to be viewed as "laws of nature." The male monopoly on violence is based on their alleged "natural" physical superiority and aggressiveness, which in turn has been codified in religious and legal texts over the past millennia. It is the foundation of all patriarchal rule, which in turn permeates all other social hierarchies.

I have hung the photo of the kick queen of Beirut over my desk. Her name is Malak Alawiye. At the time of the demonstration, she was thirty-nine years old. A few weeks later, she celebrated her wedding in a white bridal gown amidst her fellow protesters. Four months later, proceedings were initiated against her before a military court for assaulting and insulting security forces – charges that fizzled out in the political upheavals of the ensuing years.

Each time I gazed at the photo, I thought: dear Malak, what if your image catches on? What if the “laws of nature” were exposed as a deception, as a social construct, and the pillar of patriarchy began to crumble as well? What if women claimed the right to (counter)violence?

But then I realized I had overlooked something.

It’s astounding how a fleeting spotlight within the stream of daily news can sharpen your own focus. The longer I pondered these questions, the more images of other “kick queens” surfaced: suffragettes who had championed “physical feminism” in the early 20th century. Female boxers who competed against men in public arenas in early 18th-century Europe. The Brigade of Knitters who during the French Revolution demanded their civic right to bear arms. Buddhist nuns who are said to have developed a martial art specifically for women. A women’s vigilante group in India that beats up rapists.

The more I researched, the more I discovered how widespread and global the phenomenon of women fighting for, and insisting upon, the right to use violence actually is. I swiftly gathered enough material to create a series of portraits of female Davids versus male Goliaths. But such a book would have been boring. And it would have distorted history. For individual episodes involving women who hit back, attack, arm themselves, injure, kill, and thereby exert physical power—at least for a brief moment—are always marked as being exotic, or as an exception to the rule. The “Joan of Arc Effect.”

The women I write about in this book are not exceptions to the rule, nor are they “freaks of nature.” Their decisions to resort to physical violence reflect an upheaval in society, and the degree to which gender boundaries have shifted. Above all, this is an observation, not a value judgment. Patriarchal societies are spaces of violence in which people, especially women, are made subservient. But they never draw clear lines between oppressors and the oppressed. When women exercise violence within the framework of patriarchal structures, the context can be ambivalent, sometimes troubling. Many white feminists in the U.S., during the late 19th century, had justified their right to self-

defense by employing the racist stereotype of sexually aggressive Black men. The Indian civil defense groups practice vigilante street justice. In Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), top female fighters allow themselves to be co-opted by right-wing movements.

Such contradictions will be discussed further on. Yet they do not alter the fact that throughout the history of patriarchy, a striking number of women have defied the “laws of nature” of male physical superiority—and continue to do so more than ever before. Often, incidentally, with the support of men.

But the history of women who are willing to use violence has rarely been told. Instead, those stories have been forgotten and repressed—in the media, in academia, and in public discourse. In this sense, “willing to use violence” does not mean using physical force against those who are physically weaker or socially disadvantaged, but rather to resist patriarchal power structures and their concomitant political consequences.

Astoundingly, even the major theorists of feminism have rarely questioned the male monopoly on violence. That said, political theory has always been characterized as being separate from the physical. Violence was, and is, mostly treated as an abstract or collective phenomenon, as an expression of a power relationship within the political sphere. At the onset of the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, when the personal became political, theorists and activists shifted the focus to the female body. They perceived it primarily as evidence of patriarchal oppression: perpetually threatened, injured, mutilated, humiliated, murdered through rape, sexual assault, pornography, beauty ideals, abortion bans, inferior health care, domestic violence, and forced marriage. Only rarely did the female body appear as part of a subject that knows how to defend themselves, that rebels physically, in other words, that displays traits traditionally associated with men, such as anger and aggression.

Things were different back in the first wave of the Western women’s movement with slogans such as: “Every woman is her own savior,” or: “It is unfeminine to let yourself be conquered.” This physical feminism resurfaced in the second half of the 20th century, but initially only in niche sectors of the movement. And it was met with rejection by those women activists who regarded female pacifism and nonviolence as political, anti-patriarchal virtues. At its root, there lies a particularly painful question for feminists of my generation: For decades we have denounced how

women are constantly victims of sexist violence, and it has finally sparked a public scandal. But has the focus on women's victimhood perhaps also perpetuated it?

This book is not a call to its women readers to run out and take karate or boxing lessons. Nor is it an appeal to its male readers to offer themselves as sparring partners for girlfriends, wives, and daughters. It is an historical and geographical exploration of women's intent to engage in physical combat—and their desire for it. Whether it be hidden or open, or even a misguided physical resistance to misogynistic violence. For women and trans people who use their bodies to break the male monopoly on aggressiveness. For men who stand in solidarity with them. And for answers. Why is a person who commits violence, regardless of their gender, almost always considered masculine? Why are people who suffer violence, whether women or men, almost always portrayed as effeminate?

In the following pages, you will find a lot of punching, kicking, and shooting. Of course, it's also about theories, ideologies, and debates. But above all, it's about muscles, breath, voice and the determination or the fear of taking a stand. It's about your own memories of assaults, escapes, and resistance, about anger swallowed and anger resurfaced, about expansion or self-imposed limitations, and freedom of movement. The French philosopher Elsa Dorlin calls this the "body archive." The body archives of the people I spoke with were crucial sources for this book. Yet, I also could not ignore my own archive, neither while writing, reading, nor listening.

This is not a trigger warning. It is an invitation to a journey of discovery. The fervor of British suffragettes for Japanese martial arts was just as new to me as the accounts of a sweaty Marlene Dietrich in a boxing ring in Berlin in the 1920s. I knew nothing about the elite female unit in the army of a West African kingdom that struck more fear into European colonial troops than male fighters. I knew nothing about the role of "ladyboys," trans women, in Thai boxing. Or of the Luchadoras in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico—female wrestlers who fight to reclaim the image of female bodies in the "City of femicides."

Now, of all times, it may seem somewhat delusional to tell a different history about violence and physical relationships between women and men. Especially since this book is being published in the midst of a dramatic and global backlash against feminism and human rights. Gender awareness, same-sex marriage, and the legality of abortion which has turned into a battleground within right-wing discourse. Politicians are winning elections by means of outright misogyny. While I was writing this book, Donald Trump—who has since been convicted of sexual abuse—was re-elected

president of the United States. In online forums, right-wing influencers are promoting the rape of women as a "real" man's prerogative, generating millions of clicks in the process. Militant, wounded masculinity, combined with a nationalist narrative, still poses—more than ever—a global threat. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is a particularly shocking example, not to mention how shortly before the war began, Vladimir Putin used a rape metaphor to announce his intentions: "You'll just have to submit, my beauty."

These setbacks are distressing. I had to remind myself daily that they are not proof that the fight for gender justice is a hopeless endeavor, instead they are a reaction to its successes. The process of emancipation for women and queer people is arguably the greatest revolution in recent human history. It meanders, sometimes runs into dead ends, and is hampered by contradictions and setbacks. We are still a far cry from a gender-equal society. And the recent backlash shows how quickly achievements can be unraveled. The vast majority of the millions of followers of a militant, resentful, and violence-prone "manosphere" are young men and male adolescents who will carry their longing for an authoritarian patriarchy into the coming decades.

This makes it all the more crucial that more and more women—and men—in more and more parts of the world are challenging the very foundation of this patriarchy: the belief that physical superiority and the resulting propensity for aggression are something inherently male—and that physical inferiority and a tendency toward passivity is something inherently feminine.

My journey through the stages of physical feminism began in libraries and archives, tracing the footsteps of "brawling women" from centuries past. From there, it moves on to Great Britain, Mexico, Benin in West Africa, and Thailand. In the end, I land in the slums of Nairobi and in Berlin's Kreuzberg district. Two of so many locations where people have come to understand that patriarchal violence is not based on an immutable, biological superiority, but on a social construct that they can change. For me, these places are realistic utopias. They are not peaceful. There is boxing, wrestling, shouting, and fighting. Boys learn there that aggressiveness is human and that dominance over women is not masculine. Girls learn to stop belittling themselves and instead step confidently into the world with their bodies.

Or as first-wave feminists put it: They learn that it is "unfeminine to let yourself be conquered."

CHAPTER 1

On the Appearance and

Disappearance

of Brawling Women

On the Appearance and Disappearance of Brawling Women

At the age of eight, I asked my mother for a pair of boxing gloves for Christmas. “Out of the question,” she declared. “You’re already walking around like a truckdriver. Take ballet lessons!” Back then, I had decided to explore the world as a boy. I despised skirts, dolls, and the girls in my class who carried around pink scrapbooks. I had short hair, dreamed of being a Bundesliga pro, and challenged anybody to a scuffle, who refused to let girls play on the soccer field. If I won, I got to play as “Andi.” If I lost, they made fun of me. And maybe I’d get to play goalkeeper for a few minutes, if one of the players got fed up. My mother soon dropped the idea of ballet and resigned herself to my behavior. Better a daughter who got into fistfights than a son who played with dolls. Still, I never got the gloves. A girl doesn’t box, my mother said unequivocally. And I couldn’t have agreed with her more. As far as I was concerned, I wasn’t one anyway.

Of course, I couldn’t have known back then just how provocative my wish was. The idea that women and girls could punch somebody in the face, or assert themselves aggressively in the world with their bodies, was considered unthinkable in those days—we’re talking about the late 1960s. And so it remained for a very long time.

A good two decades later—by then I had bought my own pair of boxing gloves and made peace with my gender identity—I eagerly opened one of the then best books on boxing, written by a self-proclaimed feminist. Yet, instead of a appeal for women to engage in combat sports, I read a eulogy to the punch as a male privilege. A man’s masculinity, wrote the U.S. author Joyce Carol Oates in her 1987 essay “On Boxing,” consists in the use of his body, “but also in the triumph over another man’s body.” Nonsense, I thought; I know that feeling of triumph too.

Oates believed what nearly everybody had believed back then: nature had endowed only men with an aggressive physicality at birth. That is, the ability and desire to fight are biologically hardwired and not culturally determined. This belief has stuck, even though female professional boxers and MMA fighters have long been competing against each other in venues such as Madison Square Garden. The history of fighting, whether in the military, in sports, or in duels, continues to be portrayed as a male-dominated narrative; from the gladiators of Rome to medieval tournaments to Muhammad Ali. In reality, it is predominantly male—but it also includes a great many women.

In libraries, I discovered stories about female gladiators in Roman arenas and female samurai in feudal Japan. In a martial arts trade magazine, I found illustrations of judicial duels in 15th-century German principalities. The disputing parties decided on a person's guilt or innocence through combat, using slingshots and spiked clubs. This included duels that women also fought against men, whom they had accused of rape.

Two amateur women historians, both are enthusiastic martial artists, pointed out how women led revolts on slave ships. In the wars fought by indigenous peoples against the U.S. Army and white settlers, far more women were involved in combat than had long been assumed.

I hung pictures of these women over my desk next to the photo of the Beirut Kick Queen. The row grew longer and longer, and it was increasingly obvious that women use physical violence for all sorts of reasons, right and wrong. I wondered why societies tolerated, or even approved of this flagrant transgression of gender boundaries during certain (mostly brief) eras. And why were they subsequently ostracized, suppressed, or banned again for extended periods of time?

Perhaps the story of one of the great European boxing legends can offer a bit of insight. She was born in the late 17th or early 18th century. I could not find any pictures of her. But there are enough traces in books and newspaper reports to bring her back to life.

Boxing in Mixed Doubles

In an advertisement for a fistfight in the *London Journal*, dated June 23, 1722, I found an advertisement by a certain Elizabeth Wilkinson, challenging a market woman named Hannah Hayfield to a fight. "I invite her, for the sake of satisfaction, to meet me on the stage and box for three guineas." It is unclear whether Wilkinson and Hayfield had actually gotten into an argument. Perhaps the market woman had claimed to be stronger than the "European Champion," as Elizabeth Wilkinson was called in those days.

Her opponent responded with her own advertisement in the *London Journal*: "I, Hannah Hayfield of New Gate Market, have taken note of Elizabeth Wilkinson's determination and, with God's help, will not fail to give her more blows than words." The venue for the fight was Hockley-in-the-Hole.

Back in the day, Hockley-in-the-Hole was notorious for sinking into the mud whenever it rained. And it was also famous for being home to London's most popular "bear garden," a mixture of fighting ring, open-air tavern, and fairground. Every Monday and Thursday, "bear and bull baiting" was a feature of the program—the spectacle of trained dogs hunting of bears and bulls in a fenced arena had proliferated during the Elizabethan era. Its popularity remained undiminished, despite—or perhaps because—the garden's owner had been mauled to death by a bear just a few years earlier. Now, in addition to animals, "masters in the noble art of defense" were also on the program. In previous years, they occasionally had featured bare-knuckle fights. But now they were turning into spectacles for the masses. Since boxing gloves had not yet been invented, adversaries fought with bare fists, sometimes also with short swords. During breaks, attendants hastily stitched up cuts and lacerations.

The royal family and the church detested the bear gardens and their drunken crowds, whose enthusiasm for physical combat had to have upset the authorities. Nevertheless, aristocrats, artists, and travelers mingled with the common folk, torn between horror and fascination for this "truly English delight" in fighting, as the Frankfurt patrician Zacharias Konrad von Uffenbach noted during a visit to the island in 1710. He was particularly fascinated by the fact that women also boxed and fenced "without corsets and nothing but undergarments." Among the rows of spectators one could spot the writer Jonathan Swift, the poet Alexander Pope, and the painter William Hogarth, who captured scenes from the Bear Garden in his paintings., was a regular customer.

Where Elizabeth Wilkinson had once boxed against Hannah Hayfield for three guineas on Ray Street in the Clerkenwell district, there now stands a chic restaurant. Over handmade ravioli with scallops and lobster bisque for 27 pounds, you can imagine how Wilkinson landed the first blow to her opponent.

According to the description in the *London Journal*, the two fought “with great valor” and “to no small satisfaction from the spectators” for nearly half an hour. And they did so with clenched fists. The rules at the time required that women fighters held coins in their fists so that they would not be tempted to scratch their opponent. Wilkinson's and Hayfield's knuckles must have been as bloody and swollen as their faces after just a few rounds. Wilkinson was ultimately declared the winner.

She fought for several years—alone or together with her husband in mixed doubles against other couples. The press celebrated her as the “City and European Champion” and “Britannia's mightiest heroine.” Apparently, she was just as popular as her contemporary James Figg, founder of the first school for boxing, swordplay and stick fencing, and the most famous male fighter in England at the time.

Just like Figg, Wilkinson presumably won all her fights. In any case, no defeat has ever been recorded anywhere. Just like Figg, she was also a master of the art of self-promotion. For her victory over Ann Field, a donkey driver, she is said to have pocketed ten pounds, a substantial prize at the time. She had announced her opponent's defeat with a swagger to that of Muhammad Ali 250 years later. “The blows I shall land on her will be more severe than any she's ever dealt her donkeys.”

Her final documented match is dated October 7, 1727. Perhaps she had wanted to retire at the peak of her career, or perhaps her body was beginning to fail her. In July of that same year, she had competed with her husband in a mixed doubles match against an Irish married couple. Twenty guineas in prize money went to the couple who, according to the fight's announcement, “dealt the most blows and cuts” with the short sword. There must have been plenty of blood shed during that fight, though nothing could be found in the archives regarding the winner. In any case, the trail of Elizabeth Wilkinson went cold that year. Nothing is known about her life before or after her boxing career. Yet, decades after his death, heroic verses were still being written about Figg. Today he is regarded as the “father of modern boxing,” and his name was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in the USA in 1992. As for Wilkinson, we don't have a clue what she had looked like.

It is a known fact that women have been repeatedly erased from the historical record. But why had Elizabeth Wilkinson been celebrated so euphorically all those years? Why did women boxers in the bear gardens seem so normal?

Sex, riots, splendor, and squalor—so describes British historian Jerry White 18th-century London. The city was booming and stinking. More and more people were flocking to the center of an expanding empire. Elegant neighborhoods and slums sprang up. Violent crime mingled with social resistance; the streets teemed with prostitutes. White describes them not only as victims, but also as businesswomen who defied the female norm of sexual submissiveness.

In these early days of the Industrial Revolution, opportunities often emerged out of sheer necessity. Women working in jobs that required heavy physical labor were the ones who competed against each other in the bear gardens. Their nicknames in the arena often referred to their profession: the “boxing blacksmith,” the “brawling market lady,” the “fighting donkey driver.” London, the city of extremes, was their training ground. Infiltrating a male-dominated domain like blacksmithing required both physical and verbal quick-wittedness to deal with hostility and assaults. A prize fight amid the cheers of a drunken audience likely offered a welcome change of pace for a boxing woman blacksmith.

Women were also able to establish themselves as fighters because the bear pits were considered depraved by the upper classes. The supposedly lower class had more freedom to play around with customs and honor. In the eyes of the powerful, they possessed neither. Let the lowlifes, both men and women, beat each other up.

And so they did, until high society discovered boxing for itself. Toward the end of the 18th century, bare-knuckle fighting shed its lower-class image in its stronghold of Great Britain. The rowdy spectacles transformed into more respectable events with increasingly sophisticated rules. They built new arenas with rows of seats. The “truly English delight” in fighting, which the Frankfurt traveler Zacharias Konrad von Uffenbach had noted in 1710, grew to be a British virtue. A masculine British virtue.

According to sociologist Norbert Elias, who studied the role of violence in societies extensively, this offered classic proof of the civilizing effect of sports. The U.S. author Malissa Smith, whose research and books had led me to Elizabeth Wilkinson, has a different thesis. She does not

contradict Elias; she locates him within a feminist context. The more permeable gender boundaries in the bear gardens, according to Smith, fell victim to world politics.

After eight years of war, the Empire had lost its North American colonies in 1783. As a result, patriarchal major powers developed a knee-jerk obsession with national physical masculinity, believing their inviolability was now under threat. Following the defeat in the American War of Independence, British media and politicians were concerned about the military capabilities of the Empire in general, and of the British men in particular. Boxing, long despised as a pastime for the common folk, now offered an ideal projection screen for masculine courage and, because it was increasingly regulated, for "British fairness."

Women engaging in fistfighting has been documented well into the late 18th century. However, they were increasingly being criticized as an affront to "true womanhood." Great Britain's growing middle class now dictated gender norms wherein women, in contrast to men, were considered physically weaker but morally stronger, and consequently better suited to their own homes than to the harsh, filthy world of factories, offices, and parliaments. She was supposed to be graceful, the ideal woman of the dawning Victorian era, well-versed in music, drawing, and French, and free from any need for sexuality and physical autonomy. Fashion evolved to match these ideals. In the new hoop skirt, known as a crinoline, a woman could not even scratch her own knee. The "brawling females" were no longer wanted in the boxing ring. Instead, they were more than welcome to sit at ringside. Women fighters, Smith writes, were turned into the "spectator, marveling in awe at British masculinity."

In her book "The Patriarchs," which explores the origins of male dominance, British science journalist Angela Saini takes the argument a step further. The idea that the state should conform to the model of the patriarchal family had long been a consensus in Europe, but it was pursued with particular relentlessness by the British Empire and exported throughout the world. "When the family was under control, when everybody strictly adhered to gender norms," writes Saini, "the state was secure." The growing middle class had the task of exemplifying these family values with their strict segregation of genders. There was no longer any room for Britannia's brawling heroines.

The more I read about the women fighters in the Bear Garden, the more familiar the scenery felt. The roaring crowd, the reek of alcohol and sweat, the loud, sensationalist announcement of the next fight—I felt as if I had seen it all before. And I had. Specifically in the modern American version of the Bear Garden.

