

Anna Marta Marjankowska

[samstada@protonmail.com](mailto:samstada@protonmail.com)

Slagtog Femínisk Sjálfsvörn

<https://slagtog.org/>

## Introducing Feminist Self-Defense trainings in Iceland: context, issues, methods

The article is an outcome and integral part of the “*Silne, odważne i solidarne Dziewczyny\* się bronią!*”<sup>1</sup> (*Strong, brave, and solidary girls defend themselves*) project funded by the Active Citizens Fund - National program, financed from the EOG Funds (2020-2023). The project was a collaboration between Slagtog Femínisk Sjálfsvörn (Reykjavík, Iceland) and Fundacja Autonomia (Kraków, Poland).

SLAGTOG is a self-organized group of women and queer people focused on prevention of gender-based violence. Five trainers based in Iceland went through their Training of Trainers program (2020-2022) led by Garance ISBL (Brussels, Belgium), an organization with 30 years of experience in designing programs, workshops and campaigns in the field of prevention of GBV. The training program was funded from the ERASMUS+ grant.

The trainers organized in SLAGTOG have various expertise and experience, coming from different origins: Icelandic, Afghan, Polish, Spanish, having migrant and refugee backgrounds, working in care work, service and office jobs. Feminist self-defense trainers collectivize their individual perspectives and knowledge in the group, and learn from participants in every training, in order to adapt the material from the workshops for specific groups and their needs.

As part of the cooperation between Slagtog Femínisk Sjálfsvörn and Fundacja Autonomia the following practical outcomes have been achieved:

## In Iceland

- two groups of Polish-speaking women in Reykjavik received a 14-hours weekend training in the WenDo Feminist Self-Defence method;
- a seminar related to the „No means No” campaign with Tabú, a local organization led by Women with Disabilities, was organized;
- the seminar was followed by a discussion on ‘the empowerment of girls in practice’ with local teachers and educators.

## In Poland

- Autonomia Foundation organized a WenDo Academy, for 24 new WenDo trainers from Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Belarus (220h of training with specializations: work with girls, teenagers, young women, and People with Disabilities);
- The “16 Days Against Violence” Campaign was organized;
- Around 100 people took part in events popularizing feminist self-defense;
- Trainers with different backgrounds in gender-based violence prevention had the opportunity to evaluate their techniques and pedagogies; they exchanged know-how related to working with different communities, people socialized as girls and women, and trans people in various national contexts.

The collaboration with trainers from the Autonomia Foundation, who have many years of experience in Feminist Self-Defense, was a highly valuable experience for the local trainers in Slagtog. There are currently five trainers educated in Feminist Self-Defense in Iceland, who need further regular trainings in the field of violence prevention.

The trainers from Slagtog had the opportunity to observe and evaluate different training methods, trainers’ roles, and ways of explaining exercises, i.e., breathwork, voicework, movement; establishing a bond with the participants, facilitation of discussions, keeping safety measures, and assuring psychological comfort of the participants. International knowledge exchange with other trainers is complicated because of the geographical remoteness of Iceland. Because of that every opportunity for collaboration, especially involving observation of other trainers in practice, is highly valuable.

The trainers from Iceland noticed that there is a significant change in the participants' feeling of comfort when they are offered conditions to express themselves freely in their native language: the participants were more confident while talking about uncomfortable situations, they opened themselves to vulnerability and honest practice.

The Polish speaking trainer in Slagtog reported having noticed long-term effects on the participants of the WenDo training: after the training, the participating women were more likely to take on the role of self-advocates, intervene during internet discussions through deconstructing victim-blaming messages, speak up for themselves and support others.

The experience gained over the course of this project indicates that organizing Feminist Self-Defense Trainings is an effective form of gender-based violence prevention and a potential trigger of social changes on the local level.

## Terms used in the article

What is Feminist Self-Defense (FSD)?

In a broad sense, Feminist Self-Defense is ‘everything that makes women’s lives safer’<sup>2</sup>. The FSD system focusses on how to put an end to gender-based violence as early as possible. Most of the violence can be prevented through the use of verbal strategies. FSD is a complex and holistic approach to violence prevention based on the concept of the right to integrity. It combines: **knowledge** (on gender inequality as a source of violence, contexts, prevalence, and dynamics of gender-based violence, self-defense techniques, and their effectiveness, human rights and right to legal self-defense, and victims’ support services; myths around gender-based violence); **verbal self-defense** (connection to the body, physical consciousness, awareness of body language as a tool of coherent communication, understanding and testing verbal tools for setting boundaries, focusing on one’s own needs and desires, not the needs of the perpetrator); **physical self-defense** (practical, simple, universal, and accessible techniques, ready to apply when verbal self-defense is not enough); **mental training** (developing a positive image of oneself – participant see herself/themselves as a defender who react in time, using effective strategies which allow them to put an end to the situation; the positive self-image ‘I am worth

to fight for’; deconstructing the social representation of women as passive, weak, paralyzed from fear, and to identify ‘learned helplessness’).<sup>3</sup>

### What is Gender Based Violence (GBV)?

Gender-based violence is violence directed against a person because of that person's gender, or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately<sup>4</sup>. Categories of Gender-Based violence include: physical, sexual, financial/economic, psychological, emotional, stalking/cyber-stalking, and human-trafficking.

Violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in physical harm,

- sexual harm,
- psychological,
- or economic harm
- or suffering to women.

GBV can include violence against women, domestic violence against women, men or children living in the same domestic unit. Although women and girls are the main victims of GBV, it also causes severe harm to families and communities.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Icelandic context**

It looks good from afar...

According to Global Peace Index 2023<sup>6</sup>, Iceland remains (since 2008 in this classification) the most peaceful country in the world. The Global Peace Index (GPI), classifies countries by 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators across the domains of the level of Societal Safety and

Security, the extent of Ongoing Domestic and International Conflict, and the degree of militarisation.

Iceland has topped the [World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index](#)<sup>7</sup> in the recent years, a high participation of women in politics, a high percentage of women with higher education degrees and equal access to health care being the major factors.

The official government resources from Iceland<sup>8</sup> emphasize improvements towards gender equality in the country in past decades, i.e., an increase in the number of women participating in politics, new legislations that ensure a more equal society (a legislation to increase the number of women in leadership positions and to combat gender-based and sexual violence and harassment), the fact that Iceland has one of the highest rates of women's labour force participation in Europe. The wage gap between men and women in the country has narrowed in recent years, yet gender segregation of the labour market remains persistent i.e., differences in educational and career choices vary greatly between women and men.

The current legislative act on gender equality<sup>9</sup>:

- [Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights Irrespective of Gender, No. 150/2020](#) (Gender Equality Act)
- [Act on the Administration of Matters Concerning Equality, No. 151/2020](#)

More government resources:

- [Act on Gender Autonomy, No. 80/2019](#)
- [Act on Equal Treatment irrespective of Race and Ethnic Origin, No. 85/2018](#) (Amended with [Act amending the Act on Equal Treatment Irrespective of Race and Ethnic Origin, No. 85/2018 \(adding more discrimination factors\)](#)),
- [Act on Equal Treatment on the Labour Market, No. 86/2018](#)

A regulation supporting victims of workplace-related bullying, harassment and violence (author's note):

- [Regulation on actions against bullying, sexual harassment, gender-based harassment and violence in the workplace, No. 1009/2015](#)

## A Closer Look

Does the law truly protect vulnerable groups?

- Women of foreign origin
- Women with Disabilities

Problem: bias against women of foreign origin

In the past years, more research papers in Iceland refer to narratives of individuals found on social media (testimonies published on Facebook during the #metoo moment in 2018) and stories shared publicly in debates and conferences.

Jón Ingvar Kjarran and Brynja E. Halldórsdóttir analyzed 10 narratives of women who published their stories online during the rise of the Icelandic #metoo movement. The authors analyze narratives through the regimes of violence using critical theory: “Through their narratives, the women shared instances of exclusion, which indicate that access to the Icelandic economic, social, and cultural communities can often be quite limited. The women indicate that sociocultural boundaries are actively maintained through testimonial quieting and smothering. The various stories illustrate practices of economic-, social-, gender-, ethnic-, and race-based discrimination within Icelandic institutions. The women’s experiences reveal what can be termed as epistemic violence, enacted through hegemonic use of the Icelandic language, testimonial smothering, and silencing. In this section, we discussed these aspects from the perspective of (mis)recognition”<sup>10</sup>.

Other researchers focus on systemic issues. Flora Tietgen, Randi W. Stebbins, and Sue Gollifer in their response to the Icelandic Foreign Nationals Act No. 80/2016 write: “When knowing your rights isn't enough in the face of legal and institutional violence: Learning from the reality of immigrant women”<sup>11</sup>. Their paper discusses the impact of the Icelandic Foreign Nationals Act No. 80/2016 on immigrant women, emphasizing that legal and institutional violence affects them disproportionately. According to the authors, the proposed changes to the Act further limit immigrants’ freedoms, including access to legal representation and medical privacy. The article highlights the unequal treatment of immigrant women under this Act and argues that the law itself perpetuates violence against this group. The key points and arguments against the changes in the act presented in the article include:

1. **Legal violence and impact on immigrant women:** The proposed amendments to the Foreign Nationals Act in Iceland are described as an example of legal violence. These amendments could allow for the use of police force and medical testing against immigrants who refuse. Immigrant women are particularly vulnerable due to their experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV), and the current legal framework exacerbates their predicament.
2. **Discriminatory effects on immigrant women:** The article criticizes the Minister of Justice's claim that the changes will not disproportionately affect different genders. It argues that the proposed amendments would, in fact, impact immigrant women differently from men, as evidenced by the experiences shared during the #metoo movement in 2018.
3. **Hierarchy of rights based on nationality:** The Foreign Nationals Act establishes a hierarchical system of immigration rights based on nationality, privileging citizens of certain countries over others. This creates a society where rights are determined by birthplace, granting certain groups power over others.
4. **Misuse of law by dominant groups:** Immigrant women whose rights are tied to Icelandic citizens or entities are at risk of facing violence and manipulation by dominant groups. The law is used to justify and perpetrate violence against immigrants, as demonstrated by examples where partners and employers exploit immigration laws to control and abuse immigrant women.
5. **Inadequate response and responsibility:** The article critiques the notion that immigrant women need to "know their rights better" as an inadequate response to their challenges. Icelandic society's call for immigrant women to be more informed shifts the responsibility for addressing the violence they face onto the victims, relieving society of its duty to protect them.
6. **Service providers and lack of knowledge:** Interviews with service providers reveal challenges in assisting immigrant women, including language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of knowledge about rights. The providers emphasize the need for education and awareness among immigrant women but also point out limitations due to institutional apathy and funding shortages.
7. **Human Rights Education (HRE) as a solution:** The article suggests that Human Rights Education (HRE) could be an effective way to address institutional and legal violence against immigrant women. HRE focuses on influencing professionals' attitudes and actions to respect and promote human rights standards. However, the

article argues that HRE should be tailored to the specific realities faced by immigrant women, including legal and institutional constraints.

8. **Contextualized knowledge and accountability:** The authors emphasize that understanding the lived reality of immigrant women is crucial to effectively addressing their needs and rights. Merely knowing one's rights is insufficient; understanding the systemic barriers that undermine those rights is equally important. Accountability for protecting against and preventing violence should extend beyond immigrant women themselves to Icelandic society and institutions.

More data on Employment Based (EBV) and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in Iceland coming from IWEV research that authors of analyzed articles are engaged in will be published soon. Additional information can be found on the home page of the research project: <https://iwev.hi.is/>

Insufficient systemic protection is the ultimate argument for organizations like Slagtog, working in the field of gender-based violence prevention to continue their work aiming to empower women and girls and to increase their ability to speak up.

Another important organization supporting women of foreign background in Iceland is Hennar Rödd/Her Voice. The organization was founded by Chanel Björk Sturludóttir and Elínborg Kolbeinsdóttir, who started by organizing an annual conference giving women of foreign origin the opportunity to share their stories on crucial matters like female health, access to information, language difficulties, integration, women's place in arts, visibility, and audibility on a public platform<sup>12</sup>.

### Women with Disabilities

The World Report on Disability<sup>13</sup> shows that one in five women world-wide live with a disability. Women with disabilities experience various physical, psychosocial, intellectual, and sensory impairments that may or may not come with functional limitations. In addition, the diverse group of women with disabilities includes those with multiple and intersecting identities across all contexts, such as ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds; their status as refugee, migrant, asylum-seeking, and internally displaced women; LGBTIQ+ identity; age; marital status; and living with or being affected by HIV.



In 2014 the University of Iceland together with universities from Austria, Germany and Great Britain conducted research part of the European Daphne II Programme<sup>14</sup>. The research results indicate that violence against women with disabilities is a common problem in those countries. The women who participated in the study had experienced many types of violence, such as sexual, mental, and service-related violence. The violence was often hidden, the reports silenced, and the women rarely received support to deal with its consequences. The interviewees believed that people usually do not realize how common and serious violence against women with disabilities is. Only few of the women received help to file a complaint or support to pursue their cases. According to the research, women with disabilities reporting violence are often not being treated seriously. Adult people with disabilities tend to be treated as if they were young children in terms of their agency.

All the women who participated in the study had experienced stigma at some point in their lives. Many were also victims of abuse and felt that they were not listened to. Some had been forced to act against their will. Non-disabled people tended to assume that they knew better what was best for people with disabilities and claimed the right to make decisions on their behalf. The study also indicates that violence against women with disabilities is closely related to their low social status and dependence on others. Disabled women often find themselves in situations characterized by an imbalance of power what makes it even more difficult for them to report violence or seek help, as the abuser may be a person they need to rely on. To prevent violence, it is important to strengthen the position of disabled women in society and promote their empowerment.

The most active organization in Iceland aiming at the prevention of violence against women with disabilities is Tabú. This feminist organization run by women with disabilities, focuses on creating platforms for public statements, discussions, educational campaigns, and workshops<sup>15</sup>.

The body of research on this topic in Iceland is also growing. The recent research paper „The shame of pleasure in the lives of people with disabilities; the impact of microaggression on gendered identity and the expression of sexuality” (Unaðsskömm í lífi fatlaðs fólks; Áhrif öráreitni á kynjasjálfsmynd og tjáningu kynverundar) (Guðrúnar Ágústsdóttir et. Al., DATA) is a continuation of a former study on the impact of microaggression and ableism on young people with disabilities.<sup>16</sup>

## The Icelandic Labour Market

The recent report ‘Hidden People. Stories from Foreign Workers in Iceland’<sup>17</sup> systematizes the conditions migrant workers are facing when moving to Iceland and analyses their vulnerable position. Misinformation regarding the law and contracts, employers not following general agreements with workers’ unions, wage theft, unclear procedures of reporting mistreatment, lack of support networks amongst workers, short employment periods in low-income jobs, unpredictable behavior of managers, lack of procedures in place to prevent workplace bullying—are amongst the reported issues.

## The case of Poles in Iceland

Migrants constitute around 16% of Iceland’s population. The Polish national minority in Iceland has reached 20 thousand people (20927 people according to data for 2022<sup>18</sup>), which makes it the largest minority group in the country—around 40% of the whole immigrant population. The public discourse concerning people of Polish origin in Iceland is dominated by work-related issues (often in the context of essential workers) and issues related to assimilation<sup>19</sup>, in particular: language learning and so-called ‘othering’ (Poles being presented as a closed group using different information channels than the majority population). A recent study based on a sample of 230 Poles living in Iceland has identified the main motivations of Polish immigrants for leaving their home country: money, seeking a new job, secure employment in a better economy, and having more opportunities. “The results indicate that money and good living conditions are the primary motivators for coming to Iceland.”<sup>20</sup>

Overly optimistic expectations regarding the living and working conditions in Iceland often make migrants unaware of possible threats, including being involved in unsecured work relations—especially dangerous in the case of workplaces located in remote areas outside of the capital. It doubles the disappointment while facing discrimination, misinformation, and injustice.

Several studies addressing the situation of Poles in Iceland are focused on the fact that this minority group seems to have limited access to information regarding major public issues in the country, like in this article highlighting the differences between the employment conditions of Icelandic and Polish workers:

„The main findings are that there is a discrepancy regarding employment conditions between Polish and Icelandic labour in Iceland. The unemployment rate during the years 2009 – 2019 was proportionately higher for Poles and the repercussions of austerity had a more profound effect on job security for Poles than Icelanders. Polish-speaking members of Efling work statistically more hours per week and have slightly lower wages. University education for Polish-speaking members of Efling is less profitable regarding their wages than for Icelandic speaking university educated members. Polish speaking members of Efling are also statistically more likely to live in tenements than to own their homes. Icelandic speaking members of Efling, however, are more likely to own their homes instead of renting them. Registered breaches of regulations regarding agreements on wages and conditions of employment are also proportionately more common against foreign labour than against Icelandic people. Poles in the Icelandic labour market endure more vulnerability and insecurity than Icelandic people in similar jobs.”<sup>21</sup>

#### Focus on perpetrators’ narratives

Katrín Ólafsdóttir and Annadís G. Rúdólfsdóttir researched narratives of men who were identified as perpetrators of violence in intimate relationships. The analysis portrays how heteronormative discourses on masculinity frame the participants’ understanding of the violence they had committed<sup>22</sup>. Another study (Ólafsdóttir & Hearn, 2023) examines intimate partner violence from a feminist perspective by analyzing narratives of perpetrators and victims, emphasizing the role of affective-discursive practices in shaping their experiences, with changing understandings over time and the influence of shame as a mechanism for sustaining heteronormative practices<sup>23</sup>.

#### **FSD is an answer**

FSD is an answer to unconscious, unnamed, and undefined institutional bias towards women of foreign origin, as it not only empowers women to stand for their rights, but also explains how hard self-advocacy is. It presents self-advocacy as sometimes inevitable. It supports victims of GBV in understanding that they shouldn’t feel guilt or shame. It helps them overcome their feeling of isolation, belittlement, not being listened to, their emotions not being recognized as valid. Moreover, it provides GBV victims with the sense that they are not alone and that they share that experience with others. The participants of FSD trainings (women and

queer people) learn from trainers and from each other about different types of violence. As a result, they can name them, describe them, give examples. They can practice possible responses to recognized violent behaviors and prepare themselves for future challenges, so next time they know that they have a choice. It is then their decision to choose a strategy when reacting to a particular type of violent behavior against them. They also learn to recall and respect decisions from the past that they had made using the best knowledge and intuitions they had at that point in time. Instead of being ashamed, they learn to appreciate the fact that their decisions helped them survive.

Organizations working with prevention of gender-based violence should always respect the background, experiences, and decisions of the people to whom they offer their services. In our team of trainers, we learn from our experiences: as foreign, as migrant, as queer and trans people. Learning from each other, we gain a better understanding of the needs of others who find themselves in traumatizing situations, or are in the process of recovering from trauma. We learn to be mindful of situations that can be triggering. As trainers, we discuss not only the physical and mental training methods, but also the safety of participants, the specific situations that participants may have experienced, possible triggers, the potential solutions for unexpected situations that can occur in the training room.

### Useful resources

<https://reykjavik.is/en/together-against-violence> (IS, ENG)

<https://www.112.is/ofbeldi> (IS, ENG, PL)

<https://reykjavik.is/en/assistance-for-victims-of-violence> (a list of all organizations supporting people experiencing violence in Reykjavík and outside of the capital area)

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- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022256>, <https://rm.coe.int/1680591fd9>, <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/europe/iceland?typeofmeasure=1f21c11896d742b595f2521766b2bcf5>, <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/data-stories/overview-of-gender-based-violence/>, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release>
- <sup>5</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-based-violence/what-gender-based-violence\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-based-violence/what-gender-based-violence_en), access: 15.08.2023
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/reports/>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.government.is/topics/human-rights-and-equality/equality/about-gender-equality/>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.government.is/topics/human-rights-and-equality/equality/about-gender-equality/>
- <sup>10</sup> Kjaran, JI and Halldórsdóttir, BE. 2022. Epistemic Violence Toward Immigrant Women in Iceland: Silencing, Smothering, and Linguistic Deficit. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 12(3), pp. 346–360. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.499>
- <sup>11</sup> Flora Tietgen, Randi W. Stebbins, and Sue Gollifer, 'When knowing your rights isn't enough in the face of legal and institutional violence: Learning from the reality of immigrant women'
- <sup>12</sup> <https://hennarrodd.is/>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/world-report-on-disability>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://fel.hi.is/is/rannsoknasetur/fotlunarfraedi>, access: 3.08.2023
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.tabu.is/>
- <sup>16</sup> [https://english.hi.is/news/microaggression\\_towards\\_people\\_with\\_disabilities\\_as\\_sexual\\_beings](https://english.hi.is/news/microaggression_towards_people_with_disabilities_as_sexual_beings)
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- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/595038/foreign-inhabitants-by-country-of-birth-in-iceland/>, access: 23.08.2023
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