

LBS3E9 - Stay Safe Out There... A Conversation About Self Defense and Violence Prevention

Transcript

Naomi

Welcome to Living blind. I'm Naomi Hazlett, and this podcast is brought to you by BALANCE for Blind Adults located in Toronto, Canada. This season of Living Blind is sponsored by Accessible Media Incorporated. Here at Living Blind, we explore the perspectives and lived experiences of people with sight loss, and delve into barriers, challenges, and real life strategies for living life to the fullest. This month, we are joined by the very talented Alexis Fabricius to tackle the very important (and our view overlooked,) topic of self defense and violence prevention as it pertains to people with disabilities. Alexis has been teaching self defense for over 15 years, and has an advanced martial arts background. She holds two black belts in karate and Kung Fu, and has over 15 years of experience in Japanese jujitsu. She has worked with diverse groups of people, including people who are blind or visually impaired, the LGBTQ plus community, schools, universities, immigrant and refugee communities, women fleeing violence and youth at risk. When we learned her skill and interest, BALANCE hired Alexis to provide indoor and outdoor violence prevention and self defense workshops to about 60 blind people over the course of several years, funded by grants from the Arthur and Audrey Cuttin Foundation. We even took them virtual during the pandemic, and now she's here to tell us some of the stories her students brought forth during this time, and what they took away in the end. Spoiler alert, they also had fun! Now marrying her background in martial arts with her background in academia, Alexis is currently completing her PhD in psychology, and part of her work is focusing on violence prevention and public health initiatives. Her study involving women who are blind and their navigation of violence and risks, along with the self protective measures they take was recently published in the journal feminism and psychology. Together, we go through her findings throughout the study, and what still needs to be done to develop more inclusive approaches to staying safe. All this and more coming up. Welcome to the show. Alexis,

Alexis

Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here.

Naomi

So that's a pretty long list of people that you've worked with, not to mention different martial art styles and different approaches to the topic of self defense. So in terms of jumping in, I guess, I want to know, you know, how did this all get started? How did you get interested in self defense?

Alexis

Yeah, so I've been training in self defense for a very long time since I was a child. As I started, you know, developing these skills, I noticed that quite a number of women started approaching me asking for self defense instruction. And I realized quite quickly, that a martial arts background alone is not actually sufficient for dealing with some of the specific issues that women and other groups actually

face with respect to violence. And so this is actually part of what initiated a very long standing interest in exploring some of the broader socio cultural and psychological and political factors that have shaped the kinds of violence that different folks experience. And so this is part of what has led my interest in social science research on violence prevention against various groups of folks. But in particular, what led me to my work with blind and partially sighted folks, was that as I was doing research, I've made some interesting connections with the Canadian National Institute for Blind, BALANCE, organizations focused in Toronto where I was located. And I wanted to know a lot more about how women in these particular you know, who are blind, who have vision loss, experienced violence in particular, especially because I recognized that even though I was learning all of this very interesting martial art stuff, and even though it's sort of interesting social science and psychological stuff, didn't really know much, there wasn't actually really much written about how women with, you know, disabilities, how women from the LGBTQ plus community, how older women, how all these women from these different cross sections of society actually experienced violence. And so part of my research was exploring exactly this. Right? So that is what kick started a lot of it.

Naomi

Yeah, I mean, there's so much to unpack. I guess the first thing I want to say is, it is true that we are on a podcast that talks about blind folks or people with partial sight. But I think something important about, you know, self defense and violence prevention, especially in your work, Alexis, is recognizing that people have intersections and these intersections matter when it comes to staying safe in the community.

Yes, absolutely. Of course. It's a huge assumption, in that we all experienced violence in the same way. Like if you even look at, of course, that's not true, right? If you look at most martial arts schools, they really operate from the assumption that, you know, for example, a stranger is going to attack you, or you know that violence will occur mostly in public places. These are assumptions built first and foremost on the experiences of men who experienced violence, right? So women and other groups who have additional intersections in their identity, whether there's a disability, whether there's also, you know, race, whether there's also class, there's all sorts of things that you could consider. The more intersections you have, the more your experience of violence actually kind of shifts away from this, right? So for example, Most women experience violence largely from people with whom they are already acquainted. Folks with disabilities, not only are they already acquainted with these perpetrators, but in some cases, their caregivers and even you know, very close people to them, right? So because these perpetrators differ so significantly, don't we need different ways to respond to that violence, right? If you go to a self defense class, you can teach someone you know, how to knee a perpetrator in the groin, how to gouge out their eyes, you know, all sorts of very violent things. But if you have an established relationship with someone who is doing harm to you, becomes very difficult in some cases to do some of this work. And so, don't we need new ways of thinking about how to respond to violence? Right, or more, you know, or wider ways of thinking about how to respond to violence? Yeah.

Naomi

I think that's an excellent jumping off point to talk about the specific needs of folks in this community. So can you tell me a little bit more about what you were noticing, was coming out from the blind and

partially sighted community about what their needs are in relation to self defense or violence prevention?

Alexis

Sure. Well, I'll start with saying that, you know, folks have already known researchers have already known government researchers have already known that folks with vision loss and blindness, are among the highest victimized groups, among folks with disabilities. And so that's, despite knowing that there are no real, you know, there's no real programming, there's nothing really substantial to actually offer folks with blindness and vision loss to help mitigate that, you know, that reality. And so when I was chatting with women in Toronto, it was so interesting to kind of see what some of their specific needs are. So for example, women described being unsure how to evaluate an unfolding, an unfolding potentially dangerous situation, right. So you can hear voices raised around you, for example, if you're on public transit, like do are things going to be getting violent are things going south, I can't really tell, because they can't necessarily see things. Like they felt they were missing out on these very particular cues that might alert them to, to how a direction was unfolding. Another thing too, was they felt like they were especially prone to victimization, because people knew automatically that they had a disability, especially for example, if they carried the white cane with them, or if they walked in such a way that let folks know that they had vision loss that would, in their minds, alert people to the fact that they would be a quote unquote, easy victim, and would then invite violence to them, right? On top of that, there's also despite the what they felt were these limitations, there was also this very clear enthusiasm for wanting to learn self defense, right? Like they have a lot of them described actually having some encounters with violence throughout their lives and had always kind of wanted to learn this stuff. But again, even they were recognizing that there weren't the supports in place that they felt they actually needed to be able to respond to that violence. So, so it's very interesting, right? You have these very specific things that are unique to them, but then also a clear recognition that we don't have the supports to address it.

Naomi

Mm hmm. So if I understand correctly, it sounds like, I guess two of the biggest challenges faced by women, or I guess, also, sometimes people in general with sight loss is, well, you spoke about, I guess the thing that we don't talk about as much, which is more of the domestic violence piece, or the idea that when you have a disability, you may find yourself in a situation where you're relying on somebody who may not be always treating you the way that you deserve. Right? So there's that piece, but then there's also the issues around being out in the community and maybe not feeling like A. you have the resources to keep yourself safe, but B. just by the fact that you appear or, you know, you present as vulnerable to some people that that puts you at higher risk. So those are kind of the two main areas, I guess, that are not unique, but you know what I'm trying to say like there's something that those are the needs of the community that you came across in your work.

Alexis

Yeah, and I want to add one other thing here, too, is that one of the things that the women that I spoke with talked about was that they experienced violence also from people who were trying to help them, you know what I mean? People who, you know, would offer support, even when not even sorry, offer, they would impose support on women, even when they hadn't been asked for that support in the first place. Right? So there's clearly a very strong kind of ableism, that works as an undercurrent to some of

the actions that the women were describing, right? So people, for example, grabbing them, jostling them, pushing them in certain directions, assuming that this is the thing that would, quote unquote, help them and of course, these women talk about how scary it how startling it is to be grabbed, especially when they can't see someone extending an arm out to touch them in the first place, it can be so scary, right? It's such a form of violence, even though it's not intended in that way, the end result is still that you are being moved, you are being harmed, you're being grabbed in ways that you don't account for that, you know that in ways that you don't want, right? So even folks who are trying their best to help are also in some ways doing violence against some of these women. And so that I think also is such a another unique thing that where women's self defense courses for the last kind of 3040 years have really have really shifted the focus to acquaintance issues, right? Like issues of violence from people with whom you're already acquainted. But then our research kind of showed that the violence that women experienced, actually, that aren't strangers do factor in in really unique and important ways that maybe women who are sighted don't have to contend with in quite the same way. Right? So that is another important, unique factor. That's very noteworthy.

Naomi

Um hmmn. No, absolutely. And I feel like I should call back to we've covered on this podcast before the experiences of people who are taking orientation and mobility lessons, and it's bringing me back to conversations where, you know, people have felt like, they can come up to somebody who's taking a lesson and say, "Oh, you're being so mean to this person, you're letting them cross the street on their own." So it just speaks to the fact that, yes, of course, ablest ideas entrenched in our society, are leading to violence. And this experience is really important to address when we're supporting blind women and blind folks with protecting themselves.

Alexis

Yeah, absolutely. Well said, yeah.

Naomi

So what does a self defense or violence protection course look like for blind folks?

Alexis

Okay, that's a great question. So I'm going to start with first the kinds of things that have been offered in the past. So there are very, very few places and I'm talking that I know of, there's only four Well, I guess, including Canada, including my work five countries in the world that have even offered any kind of self defense programming. I don't know, a lot of I don't know about the specifics of what their content includes, so I can't even speak to how effective their programming necessarily is. However, I will say that among scholars who have looked at how we can how we can reduce violence against women with disabilities, in general, a lot of the programs that are developed are focused on improving self esteem, or improving you know, confidence, that kind of thing. Because the idea is that their thinking is that part of the reason that these women are experiencing so much abuse is because they lack the confidence, they lack the ability to step up and actually say something, which of course, is, on the one hand, I you know, I appreciate that kind of thing, like I can see that there's that could be helpful in some very limited ways, I think. I think really, though, this is very, still very ableist approach to violence prevention, because it doesn't actually impart the material supports, that women need to respond to that violence,

sometimes violence demands, being able to respond in kind. And this is why you need to be able to have kind of self defense programming. And so this is why having so few programs that actually offer women the opportunity to know their bodies as being strong, to learn how to do these kinds of cool techniques that don't necessarily require a lot of strength per se, but just a little bit of know how, a little bit of understanding of how the body works. I think it's so important. And so a lot of the work that we have developed in the last kind of five or eight years or so has mostly been on taking the assumption that women with blindness and vision loss, they want to learn, they're capable of learning. Of course there have everyone has individual issues that require adaptation, right? Some folks might have mobility issues. Some folks might have balance issues, like there could be all sorts of things. But that doesn't, of course preclude you from the ability to actually try and practice and do some of these techniques and be effective wielders of self defense, right? So the programs that we've developed have been about looking at spending some time talking about the violence that women with blindness and folks with blindness in general kind of experience. Sharing some of those experiences together so that people understand A. how common it is, and B. that they have the opportunity to actually have some validation and support and response to that. But then we also spend a lot of time making sure that folks have the opportunity to actually practice knowing their bodies in quite strong and like fun and cool ways, right? We're learning how, you know, what do you do if someone grabs your wrist? What do you do? someone grabs your cane, what do you do if someone pulls at your hair, or I don't know, all sorts of different scenarios. And so we make sure that folks actually have the chance to practice some of this stuff both on each other and with me, they have the opportunity to practice hitting pads really strongly. So cool, like, there's not a lot of times in your adult life that you necessarily have that option, unless you're at a martial arts school, for example, right? So these are specific ways that kind of some of the stuff that we have developed, has changed over time, specifically, in response to the programming that has already existed, which we felt was maybe not the most effective.

Naomi

I feel like one thing I'm really taking away is again, thinking about assumptions, the idea that, to practice self defense, defend yourself, you have to be physically strong, or you have to be able bodied. But, you know, you're saying that it's about A. it's about technique, and B. it's also not just about the physicality of it.

Alexis

Absolutely. I think one of the big misconceptions around self defense and violence prevention in general is that it comes down to punching and kicking. But I think in reality, we really should be working on expanding that understanding. Self defense and violence prevention more broadly, is anything that you can do to keep you safe to ensure that you're getting home at night at the end of the day, in one piece, so to speak. So certainly there can be punching and kicking and techniques and things like that. But there are so many smaller techniques that we do on a day to day that we wouldn't necessarily consider self protective, or they we wouldn't consider them to be self defense, but they really are, you know. So things like paying attention to where people are situated in relation to you. Paying attention to, you know, "oh, it feels like there's someone who's been following me for a little while", and then actively taking steps to, you know, test whether or not that's true. For example, walking to the other side of the street, or going into a store to see if someone still continues to hang out. This is not punching and kicking. But these are very real steps that we take in order to ensure that our safety is being

maintained, right? And so when we expand our understanding of what self defense is, I think it's quite obvious actually, that many folks do engage in self protective measures, do engage in self defense all the time, right? And so when you think of it like that, you don't necessarily need to always be relying on punching and kicking, although that stuff can be fun when you're given the chance to practice it. But at the same time, most scenarios don't even end up in physical altercation. So having a sense of how to change your voice, how to or sorry, how to use your voice, how to use your body language, how to use your relationship to other people, or with other people as important tools to help you stay safe. That is so important. It's so cool.

Naomi

I know we've been kind of using the word self defense and violence prevention interchangeably. Do you see a difference between the two, when we're thinking about expanding our understanding of what this is all about?

Alexis

I think it's like, I think self defense, when people talk about it, when people are using this term and day to day, I think their go to is thinking of that very specific martial arts, punching and kicking physical techniques kind of thing. And when I when I talk about self protective measures, I think that that encompasses a broader range of activities. However, self protective measures are taken in pursuit of self defense, in its broadest sense. So for me personally, I think these terms are relatively interchangeable, though, I recognize that probably members of the public wouldn't necessarily see it in that way. So that's a good question.

Naomi

Yeah, I mean, it could change and time. Like for me as a, someone who is new to this area, self defense would be the word that I would be familiar with. But even using the word violence prevention makes you start thinking about all the techniques that you talked about like it before we get to the point of the physical altercation, right? Like, what can we do? How can we be aware? So it's, it's a neat concept, I think, to incorporate into the sphere, and we're talking about self protection.

Alexis

Yeah, one of the reasons I like violence prevention too, is it I think, makes room to think about all the different forms of violence, right? There can be of course, sexual violence, financial violence, emotional violence. There can be, you know, all sorts of violence that people experience. And so when we're taking steps to protect ourselves, whatever those steps may be, from any of those kinds of violence, you are engaging in some form of self protection, right? So this is why I actually like violence prevention. I think it gets people to think more widely, more broadly, and to recognize actually how capable they are at responding to a lot of this stuff in their lives, right?

Naomi

Mm hmm. For sure. Now, I know we were just talking about broadening our scope, but I will say, I have seen photos from BALANCE's violence prevention programs, and I think one that really stood out to me was one of your participants using their cane as a tool for self defense. So that was really interesting

and exciting to me. Can you tell me more about how, you know, a cane is used or what other kinds of creative strategies are used in your courses?

Alexis

So this is I think, you know, in many ways, not straightforward, because there are many folks who would say, I would never use my cane in a self defense situation, you know, "what if it breaks, how do I get out of there? How do I get back home, right? I can't necessarily traverse the environment with ease if I don't have my white cane." So that's so such a real concern, right? But at the same time, I, there's a number of folks who have said to me, if push comes to shove, and this is really all I have, I'm gonna use it, I would rather get home, have a hard time getting home then not get home at all kind of thing, right? And so in our courses, we've asked people to bring whatever they normally have with them on a day to day basis, if you use the white cane, bring it with you, you're going to if you have one hand that's on the handle all the time, it's probably good to practice self defense with that already being in your hand, if you have a guide dog, bring it with you. Because if you normally, you know, navigating the city with the dog, it's important to have the dog with you. So we try very hard to incorporate all of this stuff into violence prevention, and I think any violence prevention initiatives that are working with folks with vision loss, should also be having conversations around "what are the pros and cons of using your mobility aid in an actual self defense scenario?" Because there are cons that, you know, we should be talking about. And then "can I practice with them?" You should be able to practice with them? Because that's how you navigate the city, right? So yeah.

Naomi

Yeah, it makes complete sense to me, I, but at the same time, it's one of those things where it just sounds like there's a lack of, lack of access and a lack of understanding, which is why it's so important that, like you're doing research into the experiences of women and blind people, so that we can actually have this on our radar to understand "yes, we this, these are unique things that people can use as part of their own self protection."

Alexis

Absolutely. And I think one of the big things that I am really trying to do here is that, you know, there have been, as I said, like feminist self defense groups that have existed for kind of 30 - 40 years already, but they're very much developing these interventions that speak to a wide range of people. And of course, when you are developing interventions that speak to a lot of people, there's also quite a number of people who fall through the cracks of those kinds of interventions of that way of thinking. And of course, women with disabilities have been a significant group that have fallen through that crack. And so this is exactly why we have spent so much time trying to understand those experiences, trying to talk with women, trying to actually offer them self defense, you know, one on one in person with them, to better understand those experiences and better understand what aspects of them are unique. So that we actually can develop meaningful violence prevention programming, that makes them feel good, makes them feel strong, makes them feel like, you know, they can actually do something to respond to scenarios as they unfold. Like that's so cool. Like, that's such an important thing that folks should know that they have in their back pocket. They should feel good as they're walking through, you know, their respective cities, right? So I'm very happy to have been doing this work for a long time. It's been very cool. I met so many nice and amazing people doing this. I've loved really love doing it. So

Naomi

Yeah, I mean, I was about to ask you if you had any stories for me, because you must talk to so many women, blind women, and I don't know, like, are there any stories that really stand out to you?

Alexis

Yeah, I mean, I will say like, there's a few things that stood out to me. So again, number one, like what "badasses" so many of these women really are honestly! Like, when you finally get them in front of a pad, they are excited to hit it. They want to punch they want to kick and they are fantastic. And I love it. You know, they are such a fun, cool group of women who want to do this work. Like that, I love working with them, they're really excited to do it. You know, but at the same time, I've also heard a number of stories that they've shared that at first glance may appear a little bit dark, but they always come at it with humor as well too right? That's another thing I've really noticed working with various communities with vision loss. Like the amount of good humor and the amount of positivity that there still is, even after experiencing some difficult things. But then on the other hand, you know, like... just as an example really quickly... like I read about this in my study where there's this woman, she's getting her, she's lining up her guide dog to cross the street. And this man comes by, and he just picks her up and crosses across the street and puts her down. It's like, "there you go, ma'am." She was like "I was going the other way. You brought me back to where I started." Right? And so and she talks about, you know, "I used that opportunity to educate that man." And so rather than being angry about it, and I'm sure she still was, but rather than, you know, kind of bite his head off, she used that opportunity to talk with him about ableism, "and why did you make that assumption, and you just picked me up, didn't even ask, you didn't even ask where I was going. You just saw the cane and made an assumption about me, right?" And so this is another thing that I think it's actually so unique to women with vision loss, that they have the opportunity to actually use education as a way to kind of reclaim what might be normally a scary scenario, or might be an unsettling or an anger inducing scenario to teach people and I, many of the women I've spoken with have said that at various points, they've used education as a tool in their various experiences. And like, that's so cool. So interesting, right? Like they're, again, such "badasses". They're so great. Yeah.

Naomi

I mean, on the one hand, we shouldn't be expecting the people who are in a situation of violence to be educating the, you know, the people that are assisting them, right? But it just goes to show right, that there are many ways to deescalate a situation to, I guess, claim that power back. And that's fascinating to me.

Alexis

It's so true. No, I completely agree with you, I want to be so clear that of course, I don't, at all for a second think that the onus should be on folks with disabilities to have to do that education. You know, but of course, we also live in a world where many people have ablest assumptions that shape their behaviors. And even though I don't think you should have to do this work, a lot of that work, of course, does fall disproportionately on the shoulders of women with vision loss, and folks with disabilities. And so yeah, again, to. Instead of being a lot of them talked about instead of being tired about it, or finding it, you know, burdensome they really relish the opportunity to challenge people in the moment and

really get them to think about why it was that they did that. "Why did you grab my hand? Why did you grab my cane?" You know, and making them actually examine their motivations, they said. You know, it's very, it's a very cool thing to be able to do that. But again, as I said, it just kind of shows you how how much ableism really does kind of run through aspects of our society, right? That that kind of stuff is even needed. And that people don't think about were the motivations for, you know, just grabbing someone or jostling them, or positioning them or picking them up in this case, you know, where that even comes from? Right? So.

Naomi

It's about questioning those assumptions. And again, it's, it's sad that it has to happen in the heat of the moment. But hopefully, in some of these situations, there's some good that comes out if nothing else, but for the person who's able to kind of stop and shake a person up a bit and say, you know, like, what do you what are you doing?

Alexis

Even even as small as, "ask me, ask for it, please ask first before grabbing me," you know what I mean!? Like, "I don't need help. I know where I'm going. Do you know where you're going?" Right? Right? So, and there's a part of me that wishes that we spent more time learning, or learning how to actually engage with folks with disabilities, you know, in a way that is not deeply ableist in a way that's not harmful, right? And part of it, part of the difficulties come from the fact that of course, like, many folks without disabilities don't have a lot of opportunities to engage with folks with disabilities, or even when they do have those opportunities, they're already shaped by ableism to such a significant degree that real opportunities to come together are often missed, right? And so this is why I wish that there is more time on just asking, like learning to ask someone before you reach out to touch them, learning to ask someone, "do you need help" before just assuming that and even asking that question, "do you need help", right? Like that already assumes. Like you wouldn't necessarily just ask a sighted person, "hey, do you know where you're going? Do you know where you know what train platform you're going to? I'm just I'm just checking," you know, we wouldn't normally do that to folks right? And I think it's so interesting that we, you know, want to do this all the time with folks with disabilities. I just wish that wasn't the case. So I like having these kinds of conversations, because I think that the more we talk about this stuff, the more I'm hoping people actually reflect on why they're asking this why they're imposing that kind of help in the first place.

Naomi

Hmm. And I want to dig into that a little bit more, but something else is coming up to mind as well, because you mentioned that, well, you mentioned that you teach self defense techniques, one on one, and in groups. And that made me think about the fact that education doesn't always take place in these heated situations or situations of danger, but, you know, these women are coming together right, as a group and sharing their stories. Do you find that that is empowering as well, the sharing and educating among each other?

Alexis

Absolutely, it is one of the core characteristics of a lot of feminist approaches to self defense for the last kind of 10 - 20 - 30 - 40 years, right? Where the whole point is to come together to see how common

these experiences are in the first place to know that you're not alone, to hear that the things that you have experienced have also been experienced by other people. And so to have that kind of commonality that to have that common understanding is not only such a great base to start from, now that you've recognized that we've all gone through these horrible things together, we've all had these similar experiences, now we're going to take steps to learn how to respond to them! We're going to take steps to together learn how to be strong, in our bodies and, you know, strike if we want to, or kick and punch and whatever, or we're going to learn together how to use our voice more effectively, how to use our body language more effectively, together. Having that group aspect is huge! It's so important, it has been such a valuable aspect of various self defense experiences, both in my own work and in the work of other folks who are working with women for sure.

Naomi

And now a message from our sponsor. Discover AMI's collection of podcasts created by, and for, the blind and partially sighted communityy Visit ami.ca to learn more. AMI entertains, informs and empowers. And now back to the podcast. So Alexis, your most recent publication is called "Navigating Violence and Risk, a Critical Discourse Analysis of Blind Women's Portrayals of Self Protective Measures". So, you know, tell me a little bit more about how you got started with this particular piece of your research. And, you know, what were some things that came out of talking to blind women about those experiences?

Alexis

Yeah, thanks. Um, this has been a long standing project. We started this in, or I started this in 2017. And so I wanted to learn more about the experiences of blind and partially sighted women. I specifically chose this group, because I had already established a relationship with the CNIB, teaching self defense. And I had remembered how interesting it was chatting with folks about their specific needs prior to actually offering self defense. And I was really, as a sighted person, admittedly, very disheartened, I was really blown away by not only the amount of violence that these women were experiencing, but also how unique and how particular it was, and how much, I felt that traditional self defense courses weren't set up to actually respond to those needs. And so what we did was I held a series of focus groups in Toronto, to chat with women with blindness and vision loss. And through those focus groups, I had the opportunity to hear a lot about their experiences, both the good and the bad. Of course, there were some bad stuff. But there are some very, some very cool examples of actually these women being very strong, really pushing back against violence, really taking a stand against being treated poorly, often, you know, physically, but of course, in other ways as well, too. We also found out that women were keen to learn self defense, like they were really keen, they really wanted to learn it. And it was, they were excited at the opportunity to do so. In fact, with our study, instead of giving an honorarium in the form of a payment, we actually I offered an adapted self defense program for them. And a lot of them I think, didn't realize how much they actually cared about the interview. They just wanted to learn self defense, which was so cool and so fun, right? And yeah, and I think the other thing to really note is that a lot of women were very effective actually in responding to violence. So even though they felt like they couldn't actually respond to that violence because they had a disability. In the end, many of them shared stories where they very successfully responded to violence in some cases, using their dogs, in some cases, using their canes, in some cases, using other people to help out. In some cases, one woman described even picking up a meat mallet and threatening to hit you know, an

intruder who had come into her home. Right. So such cool examples of women actually being very strong and very capable. Again wielders of self protection, self protective techniques. Right. So I think one of the key takeaways, in my experience from this has really been, even though some women feel as though they can't do it, when push comes to shove, they are excellent at it. They are great at it. And in fact, again, you don't need formal training. You just need some hutzpah, you know, you just need to get you just need to do it be loud, take up space, you know, use whatever you have, whether it's the cane, whether it's the dog, whether it's a meat mallet, you know, it doesn't really matter, right. So

Naomi

I'm going through your research, it seemed like there was these three main themes when it comes to portrayal of self protective measures. So they were "necessary against strangers", "the limited responsibility" and "an effective means to an end." And it sounds like that wasn't necessarily too different from the usual discourse around self defense, but there was kind of a unique, there was things that the women in your study brought to those portrayals that were unique. Can you share a little bit more about that?

Alexis

Yeah, sure. So specifically, starting with the first one like that it is "necessary against strangers", right. So again, this is not necessarily all that unique, and that I think most women feel as though they're vulnerable to violence from strangers. The difference, of course, is in the actuality of that, right? The reality of that even though sighted women feel as though they're vulnerable to strangers, they often are not actually facing violence from strangers. Whereas women with blindness and vision loss feel vulnerable and actually are victimized by strangers to a higher degree. So that is something really important, an important distinction to take away. Another thing to think about in terms of a "delimited responsibilities", how we talked about it is that many of the participants portrayed... portrayed themselves as being responsible for their own safety. But they also recognize that there are important limitations on that responsibility by virtue of the fact that they have a disability. Right? So I'm responsible, but only up to a point because I also can't see well, right? So in that case, it makes the importance like this is where they really placed a lot of importance on being close to people, like being able to call on strangers for help, and these kinds of things, right. So that was an important, that was an interesting thing to note. And then again, "an effective means to an end." Why this is so important is because so many women describe themselves as not being able to effectively wield self defense or self protective measures. But again, even though they talked about it in that way, many of their anecdotes reveal quite the opposite, that they actually are very effective users of self defense and self protection. And I think that that is such an important point to underline in terms of violence prevention, because it really challenges not only scholars assumptions about the effective, you know how effective these women can be, but it even challenges their own perceptions of how effective they can be, because they were very effective, right? So, and again, they were effective sometimes in some interesting ways. For example, like one woman was mugged. And when she was mugged, her guard dog reared up and bit the attacker on his arm and ripped his shirt. And the dog still had the guy's shirt in its mouth. And of course, she was so upset, and she was crying and stuff, but she was safe. And it's so interesting that, you know, she really kind of there are these, like, as I said, you know, these like superhuman abilities in some ways that are made possible by virtue of the fact that you have either a mobility aid or a dog available to you, right? So even though the dog is the main driver of the action, the dog wouldn't have

been there without her. Right? So there's this, these cool more than human abilities that kind of come together for these women. So yeah, those are some I think, some of the key things to draw out from that.

Naomi

Mm hmm. One thing that also struck me about your study is that the median age of women so the, I guess the meaning is a little different from average. But basically, you know, the, there was a lot of older women in the study, I think sometimes when we think of self defense, we think about young women. So, you know, some people were as old as 74. So, like, did that stand out to you as well?

Alexis

I know people are often surprised by this, but for me, as someone who's in self defense, this is not surprising to me. Most women who contact me over you know, over the years, who want to learn self defense actually are older. When we are younger, we are often put in place in situations in which we have easy access to self defense, either through gym class, for example, or, you know, there's a weekend course at your local community center or the local martial arts school, and that's easy to go to. But often older women have felt like that that stuff is not a good or safe environment for them. And so they often as women get older, they also fear, they also tend to feel that they're more and more vulnerable to violence, even though a lot of violence tends to happen to younger women. So even though the group is older, that is not that surprising to me. And on top of that, part of the reason that I had so many older women is because they just described wanting to learn self defense when they were younger, and never having the opportunity to do so. And that this at this juncture in their lives, being 58, being 60, being 70, this was the first chance that they actually had to do it, right? So we did have certainly some younger women in the group as well, we had, you know, I think our youngest was 24. And we have women in their 30s and 40s. But it was definitely a study that skewed a bit older, I think, again, in part because they wanted the free self defense, which is so cool! And they were very excited to do it. But again, I do think it's an interesting thing to kind of point out. So I'm glad that you asked that question.

Naomi

I guess the last thing I'd like to know for now is where do you want to go from here, now that you've had your first study, and you've learned a little bit about or a lot about the unique challenges of blind women in terms of keeping themselves safe? What do you want to know next?

Alexis

Oh, man, there's so much there's so much to still learn. There's so so much there's so many groups that need help that we need a better understanding of, you know, exactly what your your experiences of violence are like. So not only, of course, are there opportunities to learn more about folks with different forms of disabilities, but certainly folks from different backgrounds, immigrant groups, different racialized groups, different socio economic status groups, right? Like, there is so much that we still don't really know about the specifics in terms of their actual experience. And I'm hoping that more and more work is done, really considering how these different aspects of our identity intersect and produce these very unique forms of violence that people face. And so yeah, that is the that is the next step that we need to keep kind of peeling back the layers of the onion, we need to still keep trying to better

understand what these folks' experiences are like so that we can develop meaningful supports for them. Because again, it should be very clear in talking through this, that those supports for the people who need it the most, aren't there. And so we need to fix that, for sure.

Naomi

Absolutely. Well said. Thank you. Um, I think this is a good time to mention that, you know, neither of us are members of the blind community. And you know, again you touched on previously, the idea of just the lack of knowledge and understanding. So I guess my question is, you know, say somebody's listening to this podcast, whether they're just interested in the topic, or maybe they have a loved one with vision loss. What would you say to them? What are some things that they should know about self defense, violence prevention, keeping blind folks safe in the community?

Alexis

Okay, so one of the first things that I would say is that you are way more capable than you think that you are. Okay, so this applies both for women with and without disabilities, for sure. I think that many folks feel as though they lack official training, or they you know, "I didn't get my black belt in X, Y, Z, how am I supposed to be able to stand up to someone in an unfolding scenario?" The thing is, you don't actually need in most cases, you really don't need a lot of techniques or a lot of formal training to be able to respond effectively to violence. Being loud, punching and kicking, and like just moving your body, you know, taking up space, calling other people calling other people's attention over to what's happening, these are all things that folks can do, you know, that are very effective in helping reduce violence against women more broadly. So I'll also add that if you are a sighted person, if you are outside of the blind and partially sighted community, I think that there's a couple of things to think about. So number one, I would spend some time thinking about what are your motivations for imposing help on people for asking if they need help, that kind of thing. Number two, if you see that someone is doing that, if you can see that, you know, another sighted person is jostling someone picking them up, it is I think, important to step in and say, Hey, did they ask for help? Do they need help? So I think in this wave, sighted folks can be important allies when it comes to reducing violence against women with vision loss and blindness. If you're inside the community, I think if you have blindness or vision loss, I think there's some important things to think about. So again, I want to emphasize that you definitely have the ability to be effective in maintaining your safety, and you can be effective wielders of balance to prevention techniques. So again, this can include anything from using your voice, for example, when someone is really in your space, and you want them to leave, paying attention to how your voice carries really matters. So for example, if you're saying "no", it's important that you know, your voice doesn't go up, or it's not, you know, "nooo", you know, that kind of indicates maybe some playfulness, right? Or even "no", is that's not super great, you really want your voice to trail down at the end, you know, so "no!... I said enough", right? Things like that can be really helpful. Even things like, again, like your body positioning, and where you are in relation to the other person, stand up straight, try and be shoulders back, try and make sure that they know that you are not going to just necessarily back down, if someone is bothering you right, call on your friends who are sighted, call on your neighbors call on people who were standing around you, there's all sorts of ways that you can, of course, still be effective at self defense without necessarily requiring the use of punching and kicking. However, if you are interested in learning more physical techniques, you know, like, I think that there's a growing community of folks, at least in Toronto, who have already had some instruction who are interested in

practicing with each other. And so find a friend, find someone that you trust practice with them, you know, what I mean? Like, see, if you, you know, "if you grabbed my wrist, how would I be able to kind of maybe get out of this? If this happened, what would I maybe do?" Spending some time talking about that with one another can be a huge help in making people feel safe and feel good as they're trying to, you know, live their daily lives? Right. So those are some, I think, some big things that I would think about.

Naomi

So be an ally, then there's multiple ways to be an ally, whether or not you're sighted or blind. And don't be afraid to get out there and try some things out. And, you know, at the same time,

Alexis

I was gonna say, make some noise, make some noise, use your body be big, it's fine. It's cool. Do it! Yeah.

Naomi

Right on Yeah. And then if you have a chance to take a course, sounds like that would be a great idea, as long as you can find one in your area that is feminist or friendly for people with disabilities. And hopefully, we'll be seeing more of those programs as time goes on.

Alexis

Fingers crossed, they're so important. And I think that if you are interested in exploring some courses in your area, wherever you live, there's a few things that I would even think to ask first. Number one, "can I bring my cane? Can I bring my guide dog?" Number two, "are there other folks with disabilities who might also be present?" Number three, "do the instructors have any experience working with folks with disabilities?" You know, what I mean, these things right off the bat will give you a good sense of kind of where this place is at. And then number four, I would also ask, "is there a willingness to work with folks with disabilities?" Because even though many places many courses have not had the opportunity to do so, I have certainly met some folks who are certainly open to it, they just need to know a little bit more about the particularities, the unique experiences of folks with disabilities and blindness. So being able to share what your concerns are being able to share what you feel your limitations are, so that they can adapt techniques for you in a way that's meaningful. Super important. Super great.

Naomi

Yeah, now that that sounds like all of those sound like amazing questions, and a very important questions to ask. So I feel like I'm coming away with a lot of knowledge that I feel like, I'm just, I wish I could take a class you make, you're inspiring me, I've never taken a self defense class you've definitely inspired me to, to look into it myself. And I hope that people that are listening to the show, are inspired to to get out there and you know, punch the bags, share some experiences and expand their horizons.

Alexis

Good. I hope so. It's so fun. It's so cool to know your body in this way. To have the opportunity to punch and kick bags. And, you know, know that if something one day ever required you to use these techniques, you've at least had a couple of chances to practice them, often with your friends or

whatever. It is a great way to spend a few afternoons... fun exercise... it's just great. I encourage everyone to do it. Like CPR. Everyone should have the chance to have access to this kind of knowledge. You never know when you're going to need it. Right?

Naomi

Yeah. Oh, for sure. Well, it's been such a pleasure having you on the show, Alexis. If people have any questions about anything we've talked about today, what would be the best way to get in touch?

Alexis

Yeah, thanks. They can shoot me an email. That's no problem. My email address is my first name.my Last name@gmail.com. So it's A L E X I S dot F as in Frank, A B R I C I U S @gmail.com

Naomi

Amazing. Well, again, it's been such a pleasure to have you on the show Alexis. All the best with your research. And I hope to hear more great things that you're up to whether it's consulting to other organizations or just getting the word out there.

Alexis

Thank you so much for having me on. This has been wonderful. I really appreciate having the chance to share our work. And I hope that it inspires other people to want to learn some of this stuff, and hopefully to even offer more violence prevention programming for folks with blindness and vision loss in the future. Thank you so much.

Naomi

I hope you enjoyed listening to this interview as much as I enjoyed learning from Alexis about self defense and violence prevention issues in our community. We've got a link to her research article, along with her contact info in the description below, so be sure to check those out. And if you've got your own stories you'd be comfortable sharing or have any additional questions about violence prevention, taking a self defense course or starting your own, we'd love to hear from you. This ends yet another installment of Living Blind. Special thanks to Alexis Fabricius, our Producer Jeffrey Rainey, Executive Producer Deborah Gold, and the entire team at BALANCE for Blind Adults. Get in touch with the podcast on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter by searching "BALANCE for Blind Adults", and chat with other listeners in the "Living Blind Listeners" Facebook group. You can also email us at LivingBlindPodcast@BalanceFBA.org. For more information about BALANCE for Blind Adults and our programs and services, or to access the show notes and transcription of this episode, please visit us at www.BalanceFBA.org. I'm Naomi Hazlett, and this has been Living Blind. Thanks for listening, and stay safe out there.

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