



The author with her bolos

Women with Weapons

By Edessa Ramos

This article is not just for women but for all those people who have been made to believe that they are only as good as victims.

In Filipino martial culture, women with weapons are a rare phenomenon. While it is true that nowadays many Filipino women learn martial arts like karate, taekwon do, kung fu and others, very few learn the higher art of sophisticated weaponry. Still fewer learn these skills not just for the sake of art or sports, but for real combat and street fighting.

If women with weapons are rare, what more women with knives. But why should a woman learn to handle knives?

Picture a scene with a woman and a knife in it... usually, the knife is pressing against her neck, she is about to be violated, or taken hostage, or her husband/domestic partner is teaching her a lesson through violence. Nothing new or strange about it, especially in societies like ours wherein women are regarded as the weaker gender, and there is implicit resignation over the fact that she will always be the victim. On the streets, in the supposed safety of her home, in films and books, women have always been the victims of knives. And they have always been regarded as EASY victims, because it is common perception that they cringe at the mere thought of being cut, and are even more terrified at the prospect of cutting another person. It is no wonder then that for many women, the sight of a knife alone could lead to surrender without much hint of resistance.

I want to correct that picture. I want to see the knife in the woman's hand. I want to see her able and capable of using it to defend herself and others. When I have a blade in my hand, whether I am playing with my "balisong" (Philippine butterfly knife), or dancing with my "itak" (Philippine machete), it sends a message to my heart and mind that I am not a victim. And that I won't allow others to be one.



Teaching at the Martial Arts Hall of Fame

If a woman wants to learn self-defence, she must *really* learn to defend herself, to fight fiercely to save her life and limb. It is not pretty, what an assailant might want to do with a woman. Therefore, a woman must not think of pretty things if she is serious about getting away. In this world where violence against women is a daily reality, the violence is merciless and ugly. I have seen enough evidence of this during my days as a counsellor for abused women and children back in Chicago. Or simply read the tabloids and you'll see what I mean. Whether she defends herself or not, she will be cut, most likely killed or decapitated. But if she fights, she has the chance to get away. And if she has been trained, both physically and mentally, then her chances are much higher.

Many women think that it could happen to other women but not to her. This is probably a form of mental defence because no woman likes to feel helpless. But learning to fight gives true confidence, not illusory safety. And learning to handle knives brings that confidence to the highest level.



Gabriela Silang Monument

When I started learning weapons many years ago, I used to be taunted. Sure, they say with derision, women with knives... kitchen knives for cooking. Though such comments are often meant to degrade, there is a grain of reality there. Indeed, over the centuries, women have always been close to domestic knives. Kitchen knives that helped feed the family, bolos that worked the fields. Shouldn't we say, therefore, that the knife is familiar to her? It is her most useful and intimate friend. And if she can be freed from the notion that these are just tools for her subservience, and see them as projections of her superior skill and versatility, then she would reach the pinnacle of her liberation.

In Philippine history, women with bladed weapons are rare but not invisible. One example is Josefa Gabriela Silang. Sad to say, in contemporary times she has become but an icon for many. A symbol of

women's liberation, an icon for women's self-fulfillment, and so on. The passage of time has dulled her image. And by being idolized, hers has become an empty image of liberation. Not to mention all the others like her, but unknown. Women from diverse backgrounds and who learned to fight.



Training with Master Dulay

I enjoy contact bolo practice with my teacher of 11 years, Master Samuel Dulay. Master Dulay was my first blade instructor. He cured my fear and opened my eyes to the beauty of the bladed weapon. His spirit is with me in all my knife trainings. I teach not only women but every person who believes that freedom and security are worth fighting for. *Knife* is now a major part of my Modern Arnis curriculum in Zurich. My students and I train in a spirit of equality and consideration, respect and love for life. We are still awed by the sight and feel of the bladed weapon, hence we treat it with respect.

Recently, I started learning modular knife training from a specialist, Master at Arms Bram Frank. I have his advice stamped in my heart. "Don't let *guy* stuff get you down..you're not a guy..be a strong woman. Women can be faster, stronger and smarter than men. That freaks a lot of guys out."

Here's something important I learned from another honoured instructor, Master Dieter Knüttel. And it's for everyone out there, not just for women. The first thing to remember is: fighting is never the solution. However, should you find yourself in a serious conflict, you are not a victim but a serious opponent. Oftentimes, just by being able to project this, you have already won before any conflict had begun. The first lesson in learning to fight is how to avoid a fight. But if you have to fight, know how to do it, and know when to end the fight.



Datu Dieter Knuettel, Edessa Ramos, Master Bram Frank

A woman who decides to take up the blade might find herself losing many friends and loved ones. This happened to me when people suddenly realized that I was not just playing but seriously wanting to learn it. But lost friends are easily replaced by new ones, enlightened partners in the belief that the right to self-defence and freedom is a worthy pursuit filled with beauty, grace and light.

Women with weapons are women with a cause. A woman holds the instrument in her hand as she holds the conviction in her heart. The cold steel sends shivers of defiance through her soul and tells her that she is a serious opponent, not a victim. Not only that, in Bram Frank's words: "Women with blades are incredibly cool and sexy, and deadly."

(If you are living in the US and would like to learn *common sense self defence/street combat*, please visit www.cssdsc.com and contact an instructor. In the Philippines, contact www.imafp.com).

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