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To hit where it hurts

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MORE than 100 women learnt self-defence techniques at a workshop organised by 3R, the TV programme for young women that comes on at 7pm every Sunday over TV3 recently.

Held at the Federal Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, the workshop was a rousing hands-on affair, led by none other than lawyer and secretary of the Women's Sports Foundation, Azalina Othman Said. She is herself a taekwondo black-belt holder.

In her opening speech, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, the executive producer of 3R, said that the increasing number of cases of rape, murder and assault against women was very worrying.

"We feel very strongly that women should know how to protect themselves. You should at least know something, you don't have to sit there and feel helpless. That's the worse thing: to feel helpless."

True to her words, Marina joined in the almost two-hour long session, which started off with an aerobics workout before Azalina took to the mike and the girls were soon introduced to terms like upper-cuts, elbows, punches and side-kicks.

Articulate and funny, Azalina soon had everybody relaxed, partnered-up and ready to learn. "The most important thing is that your mind must be ready, you must have confidence in yourself," she stressed.

"I don't expect you to go out, pick a fight or beat up your boyfriend but I do expect you to take care of yourselves. And age is not a barrier. Age is a mindset; I've got 50-year-olds in my classes!"

As women increasingly need to travel or get around on their own, they have every good reason to learn how to defend themselves from pickpockets, snatch-thieves and most importantly, from sexual harassers.

There are two basic things to know: how to hit and where.

"You're not going to hurt the man if you hit him on his chest or jaw, your hand will hurt instead!" quipped Azalina. "You must know the soft parts of a man's body and hit him there. There are 10 vulnerable areas: his hair, eyes, nose, mouth, ears, neck area, ribs, groin, knee cap and feet."

Hitting any of these 10 spots will inflict the most pain on your harasser and gain you more time to free yourself.

Also, you've got to know HOW to punch. "Always tighten your fist for a fist punch and for a knuckle punch, you can raise the knuckle of your index finger out a bit."

Generally, our fist or knuckles are used to punch areas above his chest while for the lower parts of the body, we use our legs and feet to either kick, knee or to step on him.

Azalina then proceeded to do a step-by-step demonstration of what to do in situations commonly encountered by women who get attacked.

The most common forms of harassment are: the man pulls your hand, puts his arms around you, grasps your neck and closes your mouth, pulls your hair, or pins you against a wall or the floor.

"The first priority is to free yourself. If you can use your fingers to poke his eyes, do so. If you need to bite, do so or use your fingernails to scratch him. AFTER you break his hold, then you can run or get help," advises Azalina.

"Don't be afraid of hurting him. You hit to hurt because it is a dangerous situation. You do not negotiate."

After the workshop, many of the girls could be seen discussing what they had just learnt.

Narimah Ahmad, 24, from Sentul said that she found the whole workshop very helpful. "Often, after work, I come home late and I've had my handbag snatched before. I don't know if I can do all the moves we've learnt today but at least I know something and I feel more confident."

Jessie Maria Joseph, 24, from Petaling Jaya said, "Because of my job, I often travel alone on buses and have had experiences of guys with roaming hands. Now at least I know what to do. I'll probably just give him a nice kick!"

The main point of course is self-confidence and alertness. Said Azalina, "You must always be aware, whether you are entering an elevator, taxi or some dark places. Never take your safety for granted."

The workshop was sponsored by Southern Bank and the producers of 3R hope to hold more of such seminars and workshops for young women in the future. For more information, visit the show's website at www.3r.com.my.