



**'Strength and honor'**

Hung on the red and black walls of the Street Warrior Academy is a poster of two men practicing the sport. "Kajukenbo teaches your child the methods and arts of self-defense," it reads, complimenting the mottos of "strength and honor" and "street warrior" on the backs of the girls' uniforms.

The students closely watch their instructor, Faisal Al-Gharib, as he explains how to counter an attack with the help of his son. The girls then pair up to take what they have learnt and put it into practice. In another instance, the instructor's son mimics an attack with a wooden knife on one of the more experienced pupils, who wears a black belt. Already familiar with the exercise, the student explains: "I pretend that I have surrendered... and then I grab his hand on my neck, push it down and move it away."

More than 120 girls and women between the ages of four and 50 participate in the academy's different kajukenbo classes, which are held in a room with training weapons lining its walls. Some 40 men and boys also currently take part in kajukenbo classes at the club on different days from the women. For Um Saleh, the sport has helped her twin 13-year-old daughters become more independent and decisive. "It gave them something to focus on other than social media," she says.

**'Boosting self-confidence'**

Gharib, the instructor, established the academy in 2014 after learning kajukenbo in the United States. He says he wanted to teach the sport to women back home as a way to stay fit and to defend themselves against any attack.

As part of the training, he presents his students with dif-

ferent scenarios, including assaults and knife attacks. "We focus on self-defense skills and place the girls in conditions similar to those on the street so we can build their self-confidence and teach them exactly when and where to expect the hit," Gharib says.

The academy, which has a strict confidentiality policy, has become a safe haven for many girls and women that have been victims of assault or bullying. It is one of dozens of similar clubs and academies that have opened in Kuwait as kajukenbo gains popularity. Although in the rest of the Gulf, the sport remains relatively unknown.

"Being a (victim) of assault, whether in school or on the street, is what pushed some of these girls and women to pursue the sport," says Fai Al-Fahed, one of the instructors. "Ultimately, girls are embracing this kind of martial art and we see it boosting their self-confidence."

Khalida Bashir says she was drawn to kajukenbo after watching clips of the sport online. "I used to be afraid of everything, but this sport changed me," she tells AFP. "I have become more confident and more patient. Some say this is a man's sport, but that is, in fact, not true." — AFP

