

WOMEN'S COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION AND WELL-BEING: LOCAL RESISTANCE TO GENDERED SOCIAL INEQUITIES IN NICARAGUA AND TANZANIA

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Although it is well-documented that globalization has exacerbated structural factors that contribute to rising levels of gender inequality, social actors from diverse local contexts demonstrate that women are not mere victims, but rather have worked actively to resist oppression and promote women's well-being worldwide. Self-mobilized groups of women throughout the world are engaging in complex processes of renegotiating structural and relational injustices that transform women's well-being. The current article focuses on how two groups of women—one in Nicaragua and one in Tanzania—use land rights to reconfigure gendered power relations that have been exacerbated during realignments of global power. We examine how conscientization, or a critical consciousness surrounding experiences of gender discrimination, motivated resistance, collective mobilization, and social change. The analysis provides evidence for theories of struggle and everyday resistance that represent how community contexts enable and support women's struggle for justice in an increasingly globalized world.

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It is well documented that neoliberal processes within globalization—in particular, the economic reforms and structural adjustments of the 1980s and 1990s aimed at privileging foreign investment and multinational corporations over local and state-owned enterprises—have contributed to rising levels of gender inequality and marginalization (Acosta-Belén & Bose, 1990; Naples & Desai, 2002). However, social actors from diverse local contexts demonstrate that women are not mere victims, but rather work actively to resist oppression and promote women’s well-being worldwide (Brodsky et al., 2012). In contrast to the large swell of international development organizations that draw on generic notions of “gender mainstreaming,” or deploy one-size-fits-all programs aimed at women’s empowerment (e.g., micro-credit), self-mobilized groups of women employ a complex understanding of the interaction between local and global initiatives aimed at promoting women’s human rights. By adopting languages and practices that stem from the international expansion of women’s human rights discourse (Molyneux, 2001), locally organized women challenge gender inequities in their respective locations with strategies that are highly attuned to local priorities, culture, and social practices (Petchesky, 2003).

In the present study, we focus on the role of community mobilized resistance in the development of women’s empowerment among two rural groups of women, one in Nicaragua and another in Tanzania. In particular, we seek to understand the processes of resistance that develop when women organized within communities construct their own strategies for change that address the societal conditions that arise from realignments of global power.

Although the social and political contexts in each community under investigation vary, both of the women’s groups emerged out of land rights movements that were considered the most radical in their regions (Deere & Leon, 2001; Tripp, 2004) and both aim to reduce violence against women through structural changes involving women’s land ownership. To better understand the context in which these groups are operating, we first situate land ownership in the context of neoliberal processes within globalization, as well as illustrate how neoliberal structural changes may contribute to women’s rights violations, namely, violence against women. Next, we discuss the importance of critical consciousness and resistance in empowerment processes aimed at creating sustained change. Throughout the manuscript we pull on ideas from liberation and feminist psychologies, both of which attend to the specificities of context, while acknowledging the embeddedness of the local in global structures of inequality (Lykes & Moane, 2009).

Sociopolitical Context

Although recent global economic restructuring, in general, has negatively affected women’s human rights (Desai, 2005; Eisenstein, 2005), land privatization systems driven by a global market, in particular, have contributed to rising threats to women’s rights and well-being worldwide. Specifically, issues of agrarian change and land tenure are effected by neoliberal agendas when financial lending agencies (e.g., the World Bank, IMF) influence “developing”¹ countries to move from customary (often communal) land systems to private land ownership (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; Grabe, 2010).

¹According to the UN, there is no singularly recognized definition of a developed country. Former Secretary General Kofi Annan (2000) defined a developed country as “one that allows all of its citizens to enjoy a free and healthy life in a safe environment.” However, given that many industrialized countries do not meet this criterion, and that the terms *developed*, *underdeveloped*, and *developing* are often used by so-called First World nations to describe the relatively low economic well-being of another country in a manner that implies inferiority, when used in our article, the term *developing* will appear in quotations to reflect the problematic nature discussed here.

One of the consequences in the shift to privatized market-based systems is an erosion of the few rights that women previously held under customary or cooperative systems. This has been evident in Nicaragua and Tanzania where both countries witnessed a shift from cooperative/customary views of land in the 1980s to an era of land reform driven by incentives from financial donors to privatize land holdings in the 1990s (Broegaard 2009; Manji 1998). Although each country now has legislation declaring that men and women have equal rights to hold property (Deere & Leon, 2001; Englert & Daley, 2008), the process of privatizing land into individual titles largely has been based on norms that privilege men as heads of households, with women's access to land being granted through marriage or a male relative (Palmer, 2008). As such, privatization of land in each location has enforced and strengthened men's dominant positions while exacerbating women's dependence on their husbands (Deere & Leon, 2001).

It has been suggested elsewhere that men's dominant position in society increases women's susceptibility to violence (Else-Quest & Grabe, 2012; Kaufman, 1994). Violence against women is one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world and has become a central focus of international women's human rights and empowerment campaigns (UNIFEM, 2006). A growing body of research demonstrates links between a lack of property ownership and women's receipt of violence in Kenya, Nepal, Nicaragua, and West Bengal (Dworkin et al., 2012; Grabe, 2010; Panda & Agarwal, 2005; Pandey, 2010). Women's land ownership may therefore be particularly important in contexts where gender-based violence is widespread and property rights violations reflect persistent inequity in access to resources. Data from nationally representative samples in Nicaragua and Tanzania suggest that nearly one third of women in Nicaragua and approximately half of women in Tanzania report ever experiencing physical or sexual violence (Ellsberg et al., 2001; World Health Organization, 2005). Given the persistence of violations of women's rights globally, it is imperative to understand how groups of women mobilized around structural inequalities and human rights create enabling conditions that can lead to empowerment.

Empowerment: The Role of Resistance

Empowerment is a key concept in both community psychology (Rappaport, 1987) and international development (Kabeer, 2005a), in which it is widely agreed upon that empowerment entails the mechanisms by which individuals and communities gain mastery over their lives with a focus on access to and control over resources (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). Although once used by progressive social movements to facilitate a struggle for social justice, in recent decades international agencies have co-opted and, at times, depoliticized the concept of empowerment and apply it instead to the context of broad-based neoliberal economic development strategies (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Perkins, 1995). For example, microfinance interventions aligned with neoliberal market principles have a nearly hegemonic role in international development aimed at women's empowerment (Kabeer, 2005b; Karim, 2011).

In the 1980s, Rappaport challenged the field of community psychology to adopt empowerment as its guiding concept and to recognize processes whereby groups, in particular those outside of the mainstream of society, took control over their own lives (Rappaport, 1987). Although an abundant literature since that time suggests that empowerment is a process involving multiple components with overlapping influence, much empirical research, to date, does not identify the multiple components or the links among them (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Grabe, 2012). In fact, early conceptualizations and

investigations of empowerment within psychology focused primarily on individual components, thereby giving limited attention to context and social structures (Perkins, 1995; Riger, 1993). Moreover, many empowerment interventions within community psychology are not designed to transform inequitable social structures, but rather to help “victims” (Prilleltensky, 2008). Similarly, a majority of international development interventions utilize a “rescue narrative” by intending to rectify injustices experienced due to “tradition” that women are presumably unable to confront without outside help (Alexander, 2006). These approaches are not only limited in their demonstration of how those with less structural power take control over their own lives but also contribute little to understanding the transformation of social structures that maintain gender inequity.

In response to these growing problems, several scholars have called for investigations that more accurately conceptualize and examine processes surrounding women’s empowerment that captures the ways in which women worldwide extend their agency through critical awareness and ultimately challenge power-based structural constraints to create conditions of justice (Grabe, 2012; Brodsky, 2009; Lykes & Moane, 2009; Moane, 2003). This approach is compatible with Brazilian social theorist Paulo Freire’s (1972) understanding of liberation, where he argues that individuals are most likely to change their own circumstances by simultaneously working to challenge the social structures that disadvantage them (Brodsky et al., 2012; Moane, 2003). The concept of *conscientization* is central to Freire’s work and refers to an iterative process that emphasizes bottom-up participation in which analysis and action develop together in a limited situation. Among the first steps in this process is the development of critical understandings of how adverse social conditions undermine well-being (Prilleltensky, 2008).

Important in this approach is the recognition that “limit situations” or circumstances that constrain people’s lives are also places where possibilities begin, and it is through awareness and dialogue of these situations that a broader analysis gives rise to conditions of action (Martín-Baró, 1994; Montero, 2009). As awareness of context-specific patterns that limit life circumstances (i.e., situations whereby power differentials are a result of structural rather than individual factors) develops, possibilities for action are explored and further awareness develops in a cyclical process (Moane, 2010). In this way, resistance is not the end goal of political struggle, but rather its beginning—an emergent liberation behavior that moves towards empowerment. Decolonial theorist María Lugones defines resistance as the tension between “subjectification (the forming of the subject) and active subjectivity, that minimal sense of agency required, without appeal to the maximal sense of agency of the modern subject” (2010, p. 746). Emphasizing the role of resistance in processes of empowerment highlights the importance of critical consciousness in the development of strategies for action that suit local capacities and interests.

Although recent work exists examining women’s *conscientization* and resistance in the context of limit situations (see Lykes & Moane, 2009, special issue), empirical investigations that expand the investigation of women’s agency beyond a focus on outcomes remains sparse. Nevertheless, notable exceptions have documented women’s responses to gender-based violence in Pakistan and India and found that although women’s agency remained constrained by their situations, their narratives reflected critical awareness of how everyday struggles were shaped by structures of power (Pakistan; Chaudhry & Bertram, 2009; India; White & Rastogi, 2009). For example, White and Rastogi (2009) demonstrated the critical role of group consciousness surrounding gender discrimination in resisting injustice and working toward liberation among a group of vigilante women in rural India (i.e., the Gulabi Gang). Similarly, recent investigation among a group of Afghan women mobilized within a revolutionary organization (i.e., the Revolutionary Association

of Women in Afghanistan) found that processes involving conscious awareness, intention, and action were all important in maintaining a sense of community that could lead to changes in women's well-being over time (Brodsky et al., 2012).

Current Study

Although the current study takes an approach that centers of local efforts, rather than emphasizing political projects or agendas originating in the West, we are conscious of the bias we introduce as transnational feminist authors working in the United States. Our involvement originates from the first author's collaborations with each of the community groups and from our shared interest in women's agency and human rights in the context of globalization. Although we acknowledge that difference in culture across these contexts exist (the one in which we live and the two countries under investigation), we do not propose a culturally relativistic framework that uses tradition in a manner that obscures women's agency, nor do we propose a universal (i.e., Western) model of feminist change that applies equally well across all settings. Instead, we examined the data for processes and mechanisms linked to *conscientization*, resistance, and empowerment in each setting while looking for the contextual differences in the way these processes manifest.

An overarching goal of this article is to offer empirical grounding and evidence for theories of struggle and everyday resistance that represent how community contexts enable and support women's struggle for justice in an increasingly globalized world. Although there exists a literature in sociology that examines how women's movements in the Global South have mobilized around their own agendas (Desai, 2005; Petchesky, 2003), partnerships among psychologists and self-mobilized groups can facilitate understandings of the psychosocial processes that create, in particular, enabling conditions that reduce gender inequality (Grabe & Else-Quest, 2012; Nelson, Prilleltensky, & MacGillivray, 2001).

METHODS

Settings

Both group settings in the current study challenge gendered forms of structural inequities by using social and political means to educate, serve, and advocate for women's human rights through community mobilization. Within the mainstream global women's movement, both groups of women are revolutionary in that they are mobilized as agents of their own liberation through support and solidarity with others and resist imposed international agendas that view women as recipients of service, rather than agents of change. Both groups also bring their members into explicitly political educational activities (e.g., literacy training, human rights workshops) that empower women to challenge the limit situations in their lives and to create networks among women that may enhance their ability to engage in transformative action.

The group of women in Nicaragua is organized through the Xochitl Acalt Women's Center located in the municipality of Malpaisillo in the state of León, Nicaragua. Xochitl Acalt was formed shortly after a shift in presidential power in 1990 introduced several structural adjustment policies that resulted in severe cutbacks to public sector commitments that infringed upon women's rights. Xochitl Acalt started as a self-mobilized group of rural women in 1991 to address high levels of ovarian cancer in the remote area in

which they lived.² Over the years that followed, Xochitl Acalt formed a community of women (and men) to address additional problems and demands that were arising within the community, which included lack of food, illiteracy, lack of resources for family planning, high levels of gender-based violence, high rates of male migration for work, and a need to improve unequal power relations between the genders (Montenegro & Cuadra, 2004).

Through its membership base, Xochitl Acalt runs workshops on sexual and reproductive health, adult literacy, small-scale agricultural production, small live-stock and veterinary skills, income-generating programs, and civic participation workshops that advocate for women's role in democracy and community decision making. A board of eight women directors are responsible for the overall operation of Xochitl Acalt; however, much of the day-to-day operation is carried out by group members who are affiliated with the various programs based on their experiences, skills, and the needs of the community.

In Tanzania, the Maasai Women's Development Organization (MWEDO) was started in 2000 by three Maasai women who were interested in promoting gender equality in Maasai communities while at the same time promoting and protecting Maasai culture and language in the face of radical social and economic changes (Hodgson, 2011).³ MWEDO offers programs on topics such as human rights advocacy, women's economic empowerment, and cultural citizenship that are meant to address the needs raised by members in local communities (e.g., hunger, poverty, lack of clean available water, lack of health care; Hodgson, 2011). MWEDO implements programs in three primary focus areas: education for pastoralist girls in secondary school, income-generating projects meant to strengthen women's economic capacity, and workshops aimed at educating women about their legal and political rights. Similar to Xochitl Acalt, the programs have in common advocacy and promotion of women's rights through the use of international human rights frameworks, but focus on concerns generated by local women (e.g., cultural citizenship) over concerns favored by the international community and financial donors (e.g., genital cutting; Hodgson, 2011). MWEDO's programs are administered by staff who are employed in a central office, though there are more than 35 village-based membership groups spread throughout several local districts (Hodgson, 2011).

Procedures and Participants

The research in both countries was generated with a critical communicative methodology, whereby an egalitarian dialogue between the researcher and the leaders of the women's groups was viewed as central to conducting research that contributes to transforming social contexts and improving the lives of the groups studied (Gómez, Racionero, & Sordé, 2010). Data from participating members in each organization were collected as part of a larger study conducted by the first author combining quantitative and qualitative data to examine links between land ownership and women's receipt of violence. The full study

²The Xochitl Acalt Women's Center is located and operated in northwestern Nicaragua, a region of the country attracting high levels of international development and land privatization efforts due to the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

³MWEDO is located in an area of northern Tanzania referred to as Maasai land. Since the early 1900s, land issues have been highly contested among the Maasai who have experienced forceful marginalization to a reserved land space that spans the border of Tanzania and Kenya in East Africa (i.e., Maasai land). A combination of precarious tenure on reserved land and a traditional communal pastoral lifestyle has attracted large international development and land privatization interests.

involved administering quantitative surveys to two groups of women (i.e., landowners and nonlandowners) in each location.⁴ Twenty women in each country were also targeted for semistructured interviews to address the link between landownership and violence (Francis et al., 2010).

Comparable numbers of women from each landowning category within each country were selected for qualitative interviews (19 in Nicaragua and 14 in Tanzania)⁵ with the help of the local research team to reflect the age diversity and location in which they lived. Women were asked questions designed to assess their experiences in general (i.e., “Can you tell me a little about yourself? How do you normally spend your days?”) and to gain a better understanding of how land ownership may affect women’s lives more specifically (e.g., “What do you think of women owning land?”). Once saturation was achieved, the interviews ceased (Charmaz, 2006; Francis et al., 2010). The interviews took place in women’s homes and were conducted in either Spanish or Maa with the aid of an interpreter who was trained in the ethics of research and the goals of the study.⁶

Analysis

In previous work by the first and second author, quantitative and qualitative findings relating specifically to land and violence have been analyzed and reported. The current study utilized a different coding team and a thematic analysis to reanalyze the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although ideas of resistance and empowerment were not targeted in the interview protocol, because, as suggested by María Lugones, “legitimacy, authority, voice, sense and visibility” are often denied to the oppressed, it is imperative to learn of resistance with a reading of experience that moves beyond “social-scientific objectifying reading” and attempts instead to look for resistance in everyday interactions that reflect the power of communities to constitute meaning against the social organization of power (p. 746, Lugones, 2010). Thus, in the reading of the data for the current study, we used thematic analysis to explicitly identify “themes” or patterns by which women’s realities, meanings, and experiences reflected examples of *conscientization* and resistance that, in turn, led to the development of individual-level and community-wide empowerment (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Field notes written during data collection and text memos written during several readings of the transcripts were used to identify responses that were related to the themes of *conscientization*, resistance and individual-level and community-wide empowerment. To begin the coding process, the first two authors randomly selected six interviews (three from each country) and extracted excerpts that were related to the above domains. Once the first round of codes were discussed and agreed upon, the same two authors randomly selected another third of the interviews to double code and discuss. The remaining interviews were coded and analyzed by the second author.

⁴Quantitative data were collected from 267 women in Nicaragua and 225 women in Tanzania.

⁵Because of excessive wind interference on the recording of one interview, only 18 interviews were included for analysis in Nicaragua.

⁶In both study locations, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed. In the Nicaragua sample, the Spanish conversation was transcribed and then translated into English. However, because Maa is not a written language, the transcriptions in Tanzania recorded the English translation that was occurring during the interview.

RESULTS

We present the findings from the women in Nicaragua first, followed by the women in Tanzania. In both sites we present evidence of the development of a critical consciousness surrounding limit situations that gives rise to action and resistance. We also document how, with the support of the organizations, processes of awareness and action led to individual and community level examples of empowerment. Attention is given to the similarities and incongruences within both locations in the second half of the analysis.

Nicaragua

The interviews conducted with the women in Nicaragua demonstrated bottom-up processes in which women's analysis and action first developed in situations that were described as limited based on gender roles. Although many women did not reject gendered household responsibilities, most women demonstrated the development of a critical consciousness surrounding how prescribed gender roles, expectations, and responsibilities limited their capacities and interests. For example, when discussing their lives prior to being mobilized with Xochitl Acalt, many women discussed how their husband's control over their mobility served to limit their personal agency.

As awareness of the patterned nature of those experiences grew, women explored possibilities for action that reflected resistance to their circumstances. For example, one gendered pattern that many women identified as reflecting power differentials was the high rate of men's extramarital relationships. Having multiple partners, cheating, or having a girlfriend despite being married were all considered normative behavior in which men were entitled to engage (52% of women surveyed for the larger project reported knowledge of their partner cheating). However, rather than accept this as a cultural norm, many women shared a critical awareness of how extramarital relations threatened their subjective well-being and motivated them to take action in their relationships. One woman shared that although her situation remained constrained, she actively communicated to her husband how extramarital relations undermined women's well-being:

If I was going around with other men, he [her husband] wouldn't like that. One day I said to him, we women are flesh and bones, we have feelings as well and men couldn't just come walk all over us.

Another gendered pattern that women identified that disadvantaged them was the normatively high levels of domestic violence in this region. Similar to the resistance of relationship power that was demonstrated when confronting extramarital affairs, many women recollected individual efforts they engaged in to address violence prior to having the mobilized support from Xochitl Acalt. For example, one woman's act of resistance was intended to draw attention to her receipt of violence:

The first time was only 2 months after we got married that he hit me with a belt. I defended myself, I hit him, I bit him, I made sure there was a mark on him so that people would ask him, "Well, what happened to you?"

In explaining her motivation to confront the situation, this woman shared her experience of intergenerational violence and expressed a determination to reject a fate similar to that of her mother. Although individual resistance reduced her receipt of violence

temporarily, she explained that it was not until she engaged in later community mobilization (through Xochitl Acalt) that she witnessed long-term changes in her relationship. Indeed, because violence against women is based on power-based structural constraints, several women shared experiences of their lives prior to being involved in Xochitl Acalt that illustrated how individual resistance to violence was difficult to maintain in the face of unremitting power differences between women and men:

One time he got this belt and he hit me on here [her face] with the belt and that left a visible sign so when I showed that to my father, they realized that I was telling the truth It wasn't until that moment that they [her family] started to believe me [After that, my husband] wouldn't hit me on my face. He would only hit me in the places that were covered.

Although this example illustrates how social mechanisms surrounding violence function to maintain the situation, it also illustrates that women develop a critical awareness of gender inequities and challenge power-based constraints in their respective locations, without outside agendas or influence. Thus, the women's experiences demonstrate the development of a critical consciousness regarding how adverse social conditions undermine well-being and illustrate an interactive process that emphasizes bottom-up participation in which analysis and action developed together in a limited situation.

As Freire noted, through processes of *conscientization*, individuals are most likely to change their own circumstances by simultaneously working to challenge the social structures that disadvantage them. Reflecting this process, as individual awareness and confrontations of gender-based power differences grew, many women became drawn to community mobilization that facilitated spaces for understanding their own experiences as linked to larger, structural inequities. However, because the gendered relationships that originally constrained women's lives in the first place were still operating at the outset of their mobilization, women's initial efforts toward collective action often involved covert resistance that reflected the larger, cyclical process of change. For example, one woman's description of the secretive nature in which she would initially attend meetings at Xochitl Acalt illustrates an "emergent behavior:"

We already had four kids by that point, they were quite small. So in order to go to the meetings, I had to get up really early. I had to prepare all the food, I had to make the tortillas, I had to get up at four in the morning. He used to go off to work and then I would go discreetly to the meetings.

In this woman's interview, she was clear that these initial actions did not reflect the end goal of her political struggle, but rather the beginning. She later described that "nowadays" she and her male partner discuss what needs to be done and there is sharing of domestic roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, through her initial actions, she demonstrated what Lugones (2010) might call a "minimal sense of agency." In other words, although she did not describe a level of agency that led her to reject the limitations of her domestic role from the outset, she describes acts of resistance that were part of an iterative process that contributed to later changes.

There was also evidence that *conscientization* was further strengthened through participation with Xochitl Acalt because many of the educational activities provided a context where women could connect their personal experiences to larger, structural conditions of inequity. In particular, several women articulated how educational workshops

surrounding women's human rights deepened their critical awareness of their own and other women's experiences. For example, one woman recollected her experiences before and after participating in the educational workshops at Xochitl Acalt:

Since I was a young girl, they've always said you are a whore, you are a loose woman running around everywhere. And I even got to believe that at a certain point. Yeah . . . they would always say bad things about me and I thought, that's just the way I must be—I believed it. And it's not really until now [as a member of Xochitl] that I've, you know, gone through these questions [in the educational workshops] that I realized what I was doing was just exerting my rights.

As this woman's reflection suggests, educational processes that stemmed from community mobilization contributed to knowledge and awareness that allowed many women to experience a greater sense of well being in their lives. Moreover, in many similar examples, participation in women's rights workshops through Xochitl Acalt was associated with a shift in women's focus from individual understandings of their experiences to an understanding of widespread gender-based injustice. For many women, this knowledge strengthened their motivation to seek changes in their relationships that would affirm the inherently equal value of women and men.

As women became mobilized and took advantage of strategies that were highly attuned to local practices in order to challenge structural constraints, evidence that a combination of awareness and action could lead to individual psychological empowerment was apparent. For example, one means that Xochitl Acalt used to challenge structural inequity and create conditions of justice was to facilitate women's land ownership. Many women linked the structural level changes that came with owning land to changes they witnessed in their marital relationships. In particular, several women explicitly connected changes in structural power to increased respect from their husbands, as demonstrated by an enhanced ability to make decisions that impacted their lives:

Before [I owned land], he only made those decisions. But now we make decisions together. If we are going to buy something, we're going to sow something, we talk first. If we're going to sell an animal, I'm taken into account. He tells me what want he wants to do or whatever and I say what I think about it, if I agree with it or not.

Similarly, another woman describes how her new role in agricultural production and livestock sales fostered enhanced perceptions of women's capabilities within the community:

Since the animals are mine and the men don't want to negotiate, I say, "Alright, if you don't want to negotiate, get lost!" Then the next day they come back and say, "Well, woman, come over here, let's see what we can arrange." So I negotiate all my own things and it usually works out well.

Through these experiences of landowning, we witness how women gained mastery over their lives with a focus on control over resources. Specifically, the transformation of power structures, in part, enabled women to overcome longstanding barriers in their relationships and community by interrupting gender norms and restructuring power relations.

As experiences of individual empowerment evolved over time—through the process of awareness, dialogue, and action—many women discussed their interest in contributing to broader conditions of justice for women in their communities. For example, several women in the sample had been appointed leaders—community defenders—who were elected to actively promote women’s rights. One woman described how these roles moved beyond individual empowerment to reflect group-based resistance:

What we have to do is go around and try to convince women they don’t have to put up with living in situations of violence. And I use my own experience and I talk about it and I don’t feel ashamed about it at all because I know all of us, one way or another, have lived some kind of violence, in one form or another.

Another woman, who started out as a community defender, described further extending her involvement in group-based resistance in a manner that led to female leadership at the community level:

On February 25th we also formed a commission with the police called, Comision prevencion al delito [The Commission for Preventing Crimes]. We had a meeting . . . and I was elected to be on that commission . . . Now I’m not only fighting for the rights of women and violence against women but now I’m on this commission and that’s a way I can help my community to make sure that there’s no kind of violence at all.

In sum, the findings suggest that the women in Nicaragua were engaging in an iterative process of analysis and action that worked from the bottom up and developed from specific limit situations. The women interviewed demonstrated a process whereby individual recognition of personal oppression led to a cyclical process of confronting ideological and structural oppression, which ultimately led to individual and community-wide empowerment.

Tanzania

The women interviewed in Tanzania also demonstrated awareness of and resistance to oppressive social structures and experiences they located in their relationships. However, not surprisingly, because the culture, society, and resources available to women (and their local histories) differed significantly between the two countries, so did the process of *conscientization* and the examples of resistance. Moreover, most of the women interviewed in Nicaragua now have at least a 10-year history of collective action and involvement with Xochitl Acalt, whereas the women interviewed in Tanzania had, on average, approximately a year (or less) of involvement with MWEDO. Yet what remained similar across both contexts was the expression of localized dissatisfaction with inequity and a desire for alternative ways to experience their lives.

In both countries, women described traditional gender roles that involved domestic care taking and responsibility for the vast majority of the upkeep of their homes and families. Women in both countries also discussed an increased burden of household responsibility, in part, because high rates of unemployment and poverty required men in each region to migrate in search of jobs. However, women in Nicaragua did not identify this burden as one of their primary limit situations (a circumstance that restrains their lives), whereas women in Tanzania did. For example, throughout the interviews,

women in Maasai land demonstrated awareness of how political changes occurring in their community led to changes in cultural norms surrounding gendered labor that disproportionately affected women's lives. Although traditionally a pastoralist community sustained by herding cattle, severe drought and corporate/government seizure of Maasai land has decreased the number of cattle that Maasai now own. As a result, many Maasai men, who were previously herding cattle, now migrate to cities for employment. One woman who had been living in her community for more than 60 years shared her awareness of how women are becoming overburdened in processes of change:

Nowadays, the Maasai are going to school, but the man is not responsible to look for the children's expenses like books or pens so the mother is the one who is trying to look everywhere for the money for such expenses We know life is changing nowadays, long ago we used to have milk and meat, but nowadays we don't have such food, so you need to search for food. The women are the ones to do this As you know, the issue of land is becoming very critical to us, for example. The women are trying very hard to own land, but if you . . . will fortunately have a plot of land, no man is behind you supporting you to own it as the orders, as it is ordered [as the law requires]. So these are all the problems we are facing, especially women; the men are facing such problems, but not as much as the women do.

Many women shared similar explanations of how the changing context surrounding gendered labor served to limit their personal agency. Moreover, the links drawn between the societal changes and the increased burden on women demonstrates an unfolding of the connection between women's personal experiences and larger, structural conditions of inequity.

Similar to the women in Nicaragua, it was also evident that women in Tanzania reflected a critical consciousness of how structural and ideological gender differences served to undermine women's value and well-being. One woman explained:

- MWEDO member: It is not allowed for a man to be beaten by a woman.
 First author: Can you help me understand why?
 MWEDO member: From the beginning, the Maasai women are disqualified. They are not counted as much as the men are counted, so they just take us as some Really, we deserve such things.
 First author: They do not count as what? You said they do not count as much as men count, in terms of
 MWEDO member: In terms of how important they are or in their value.

Although this woman's account highlights that women's susceptibility to violence, in particular, is attributed to their relative worth in the community, the example more generally highlights the local development of a critical awareness of the social and relational obstacles to women's well-being and demonstrate the underpinnings of *conscientization*.

Similar to Nicaragua, awareness of how personal experiences limited women's agency led to the identification of gendered patterns in Maasai land that served to disadvantage many women. One example that women in Tanzania discussed was the expectation that wives be sexually available to their husbands. Because marriage in Maasai land is not based on romantic love or sexual desire, arrangements are made with a strict understanding of gender roles, duties, and expectations. Marriages are arranged by male elders and

polygyny is widely practiced. In this context, the number of children women bear in Maasai land reflects their status. Thus, many women who were interviewed expressed their own interest in spousal intercourse. However, among those that did not, several discussed a host of consequences of refusing their husbands, which included being beaten severely or being sent back to their fathers' homes without their children.

Nevertheless, a critical awareness led many women to demonstrate creative resistance to their husbands' expectations. For example, one woman shared an example of indirect communication as a form of resistance, "I won't tell him directly . . . because I'm afraid . . . I tell him that I'm sick." Moreover, not all women desired having additional children. Several women shared examples of hiding from their husbands during ovulation or secretly obtaining birth control to prevent pregnancy. These examples are, again, reflections of Lugones' "minimal sense of agency"—they do not reflect an end goal, but do reflect resistance to the existing circumstances.

As was also the case in Nicaragua, several women in Tanzania identified violence as a gendered pattern that undermined their well-being. However, norms surrounding violence in Maasai land differed from those in Nicaragua. In Maasai land, cultural norms surrounding violence assert that it is a husband's role to physically discipline his wives if they "make mistakes," often operationalized as women not fulfilling their domestic and household roles "properly." Because caretaking of cattle is a woman's responsibility, women's "mistakes," for example, may involve sick cattle that cannot produce a sufficient supply of milk.

Although there was wide acceptance among the women interviewed that gender roles dictate social interactions and household responsibilities, many women in Maasai land expressed an interest in discipline being expressed in a nonviolent manner. For example, one woman's suggestion of an alternative reflects her resistance to the norm:

I think the best way [to demonstrate displeasure with a women's actions] is to teach her politely if she makes a mistake and if it happens that . . . she won't change . . . just let her go back to their homes, rather than beating her.

Another woman shared, "No woman is accepting the beating. It seems that every woman should refuse it but how can you refuse it?" Other women described pursuing avenues to more actively resist the violence they received, including reporting a husband's violent behavior to village elders. Although mechanisms for reporting were institutionalized among villages, women in Maasai land, like those in Nicaragua (and throughout the world, including the United States), were taken seriously only when visible marks evidenced the receipt of violence. Thus, as in Nicaragua, although individual acts of resistance reflected women's desire for reduced violence, individual confrontations with systemic injustice often underscored the limited nature of the situation.

Similar to women engaging in community mobilization with Xochitl Acalt, Maasai women discussed how individual experiences with *conscientization* could be bolstered through MWEDO's educational processes. In particular, several women discussed how acquiring pragmatic knowledge regarding women's human rights contributed to their analysis and could inform future action. For example, as one woman shared regarding MWEDO's community mobilization efforts: "We now know that the government is there so if the elders or our relatives won't save us we know where to go for our rights." Another woman similarly explained how her understanding of women's human rights created opportunities for action: "[Men think] it's right to beat a woman . . . But now I think it's not. If I will be beaten, I go to the government offices and tell them." These results suggest that

individual resistance can be supported with community mobilization that allows them to connect their experiences to larger, structural inequities.

As was the case with landowners in Xochitl Acalt, MWEDO landowners also linked structural-level changes stemming from land ownership to individual empowerment. Like in Nicaragua, empowerment was discussed in terms of changes in their relationships, whereby women gained more control over their lives and thereby decreased their susceptibility to violence. For example, one woman, who had recently obtained a title to land, described the mechanism by which owning land elevated the status of women and disrupted their financial dependency and vulnerability to violence:

If [men] find out you have your own place, and you produce from your own place, he won't have any right to come and bother you Those times he used to beat you he beats you because he knows you depend on him and you depend on his place or clothes. But now if he finds that you have your own place, he is not able.

In addition to individual empowerment that led to reductions in violence against women, several women also identified how land ownership addressed a number of additional problems that fueled their initial interest in community mobilization, for example, food security. In describing how land functioned to address this concern, one woman articulated a new sense of mastery over her environment:

Maybe I will have to use my land as I want I will harvest and sell and buy whatever I want, maybe some livestock It will help me . . . from everything I earn from that farm, to solve my own problems . . . to send my children for schooling, and some little things I need too.

Because the history of organized community involvement among members of MWEDO was limited relative to the women organized with Xochitl Acalt, so were the examples of community-wide changes. Nevertheless, despite a relatively short history of mobilization in this location, several women discussed examples of community-level changes that reflected sociopolitical gains for women. As perhaps one of the most powerful examples, one woman described how some MWEDO members were now able to participate in community-level decision making as a result of their status as landowners:

Now [that women are landowners], we have our representatives in some governmental meetings. We have some members . . . we are now at least holding something now that we are able to own.

This example highlights how community mobilization efforts enabled women to challenge cultural norms surrounding power and decision making at the community level in a manner that could shift conditions of justice among women more broadly.

In sum, throughout the interviews in both countries, it was evident that women resisted injustice, attempted to protect themselves, and affirmed their worth even in cases when societal structures had yet to adequately shift in their favor. In both cases, women's analysis of and resistance to structural-level inequalities, societal-level valuations, cultural expectations, and interpersonal power relations were initial steps toward personal transformation and community-level empowerment.

DISCUSSION

In a globalized world where empowerment has become a buzzword employed by grassroots organizers, academics, and neoliberal development practitioners alike, understanding the local processes that disrupt inequities, and can therefore facilitate autonomy, is essential. It is now well recognized that processes of globalization and neoliberalization (e.g., fiscal austerity, privatization, trade policies) have led to a range of negative consequences that have a disproportionate effect on women. In seeking to rectify this injustice, efforts need to be driven by the voices of those who experience the harshest consequences of inequity with approaches that center on methods that represent women's own resistance. The findings from the present study suggest that when analysis extends beyond outcomes of empowerment and focus instead on processes of empowerment with the potential for transformative change, then the emergent liberatory behaviors necessary to create sustained justice come more clearly into focus. In particular, through examining a bottom-up view of *conscientization*, it was possible to establish that women's resistant attitudes or actions were sites of agency and activism.

Liberation, as Martín-Baró (1994) articulates, "involves breaking the chains of personal oppression as much as the chains of social oppression" (p. 27). In other words, because oppression involves both political and personal patterns, liberation inevitably involves personal and political transformation (Moane, 2010; Prillentsky, 2008). The resistance demonstrated by women in both Nicaragua and Tanzania, though reflecting different histories and local experiences, was central to understanding how local awareness gives rise to broader analysis and conditions of action.

Importantly, women in both contexts reflected psychosocial processes of *conscientization* and resistance that characterized the development of a differential consciousness, a new subject position that permitted functioning within, yet beyond, the demands of dominant ideology (Sandoval, 2000). This is particularly important because it is often the case that when women from the Global South express an interest in change that appears congruent with Western values, they are often accused of pandering to a Western political agenda (Tripp, 2002). However, this reaction fails to recognize that women are capable of mobilizing around their own interpretations of rights without Western influence and discredits numerous movements organized around gendered justice across the globe (Tripp, 2002). A focus on transforming aspects of women's lives that had long been a site of resistance may plant the seeds for both personal and political liberation.

The findings also suggested that the changes in opportunity structures via participation in Xochitl Acalt and MWEDO facilitated a shift in consciousness about women's rights and worth, thereby enhancing a desire for societal recognition of more equitable realities. Organizational participation, education, and awareness about legal protections increased women's consciousness of their rights and encouraged and validated their desire and ability to actively create change in their own lives and in their communities. For many women, having the opportunity to own land enhanced women's conceptualizations of their own capabilities and expectations regarding how they should be valued and treated. These structural changes also shifted women's status within their relationships and communities, resulting in greater respect and treatment, and increased how women's capabilities and contributions were valued. Consequently, community mobilization efforts among individuals of Xochitl Acalt and MWEDO were part of an empowering process that created sustainable, community-wide change.

Nevertheless, several limitations to this study remain. First, because the interviewees were members of the organizations that focused on land rights and violence-related

issues, their own personal investment in the women's organizations may have contributed to bias. To reduce this bias, we hired interviewers external to the program and asked a large number of probes to check answers for consistency and accuracy. Second, there are debates within qualitative research concerning what the appropriate sample size is. Our sample sizes of 14 in Tanzania and 19 in Nicaragua were smaller than some recommendations (e.g., 30; Morse, 1994). Given field practicalities to garnering a larger sample size, we explicitly drew upon Charmaz's (2006) suggestion to characterize a point at which our interview themes reached saturation; we believe that we came close to saturation of concepts in our sample.

Third, the samples are not necessarily generalizable to all regions in Nicaragua and Tanzania that have a high rate of violence—or to all programs that focus their work on the intersection of women's rights and land ownership. Still, within this understudied area, we have offered preliminary qualitative results illustrating how resistance and empowerment processes may operate to improve conditions of women's justice and well-being. Future research should seek to explore how these processes work with larger groups of women in different situational and geographic contexts and over longer periods of time.

In the 26 years since Rappaport (1987) encouraged the field to adopt empowerment as its guiding concept, researchers, activists, and citizens have seen significant changes to the political and economic structure of the global community, often yielding deleterious consequences to the well-being of those groups that are most vulnerable. As societies move forward it is imperative that we collectively seek to understand what will create a more inclusive, just, and equitable society. Moane (2003) explains that liberation will “ultimately involve transformation of oppressive social structures, which can only occur through collective action” (p. 92). Both of the organizations in the current study embody this principle and are successfully creating structural changes in areas women have long resisted injustice.

Furthermore the success of the programs supported by Xochilt Acalt and MWEDO likely rests on the fact that participating members were the very actors who were seeing, experiencing, and expressing desired changes. Scholars and activists alike who wish to support the empowerment of marginalized individuals and foster more equitable global relationships should partner with justice-oriented social actors who share a respect for local actors to more completely and holistically enhance the well-being of individuals, groups, and communities.

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