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# Women's Land Ownership and Relationship Power: A Mixed Methods Approach to Understanding Structural Inequities and Violence Against Women

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## Abstract

Violence against women is a widespread societal problem substantiated and perpetuated through inequities that operate within numerous levels of the society. Challenging and ending gender-based violence therefore requires addressing social structures that perpetuate gendered hierarchies and maintain women's susceptibility to experiencing violence worldwide. The present study examines novel approaches taken by women in two different countries in the Global South, one in Nicaragua and another in Tanzania, to examine macro-level processes involved in land ownership in regions where owning land is a marker of dominance. Using data from 492 women, results from structural equation models and qualitative thematic analyses demonstrate significant links among women's ownership of land, relationship power, and receipt of physical and psychological violence in both the countries. Collectively, the findings suggest that when women own land, they gain power within their relationships and are less likely to experience violence. Implications for theoretical conceptualizations of eradicating violence against women and practical interventions are discussed.

## Keywords

intimate partner violence, power, relationship quality, human rights, sexism, ownership, cross-cultural differences

Women's rights to the health and safety of their bodies have become a topic of increasing concern for organizations as large as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations that recognizes violence against women as one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world (United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2006). Similarly, academic research has led to the awareness that domestic violence, in particular, is a serious public health problem with grave implications for women's physical and psychological well-being (Chrisler & Ferguson, 2006; Jordan, 2009; Koss, 1990). Moreover, women's lived experience has sparked social movements and activists who work in local contexts to address violence against women within their communities (Ferree & Tripp, 2006). Yet, despite great strides in raising awareness of the prevalence and consequences of such violence, high worldwide rates of violence against women continue unabated (WHO, 2012). Efforts to curb violence against women may be limited, in part, because existing research has not adequately investigated the structural inequities that perpetuate a system of power imbalances that put women at risk of experiencing violence (Else-Quest & Grabe, 2012; Fine, 1989; Grabe, 2010a).

Because violence is a societal problem requiring changes in the social structures that perpetuate gender hierarchy,

social psychological investigation into structures by which violence against women are supported and sustained is necessary (Grabe, 2010b). Taking a critical view of how structural inequities perpetuate a system of gender-based violence requires broadening current paradigms and approaches to include underrepresented perspectives. In particular, women from the Global South<sup>1</sup> (Mohanty, 2003; Naples & Desai, 2002)—many of whom have experienced increased violations of their rights in an ever increasingly globalized world—have typically been excluded from academic discourse in the North. In the current study, we examine novel approaches taken by women in two different countries of the Global South, Nicaragua and Tanzania, to examine whether women's land ownership reflects a sociocultural structure related to women's relationship power and receipt of violence in multiple contexts. Focusing on women's land rights in the Global South can provide a timely and useful illustration of

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how local initiatives that appropriate international discourses on human rights are seeking to address women's human rights violations.

### *Structural Inequities and Gender in a Globalized Context*

For decades social psychologists have argued that structural inequities should be examined to understand well-being instead of focusing on variables that assess individual differences alone (Apfelbaum, 1979; Pettigrew, 1991). In particular, it has been suggested that an individual-level focus downplays the sociohistorical and cultural context in which interpersonal exchanges are embedded and overlooks an intersectional analysis of the roles of multiple, simultaneous power injustices in women's rights violations (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1995; Griscom, 1992; Stewart, 1998; Yoder & Kahn, 2003). Nevertheless, the bulk of mainstream psychology continues to study individuals in micro-level investigations that separate individuals from their social context, with a near neglect of attention to social structures (Cortina, Curtin, & Stewart, 2012). This approach renders oblique factors such as capitalism and patriarchy that intersect to sustain women's risk for violence (Fine, 1989; Moane, 1999). In order to reduce women's susceptibility to violence in an interconnected and globalized world, investigations should reflect multiple layers of society that demarcate women's subordinate positions (Heise, 1998).

Women's experiences in the Global South are inextricably linked to systemic inequities of global power. Decolonial feminist scholars therefore note the importance of considering the intersections among gender, economic exploitation, and other social hierarchies in the context of increasing global capitalism when attempting to understand violations against women (Grabe & Else-Quest, 2012; Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 2003). For instance, it is now well documented that the neoliberal economic policies of the 1980s and 1990s introduced or exacerbated several structural inequalities that contribute to rising levels of women's marginalization (Naples & Desai, 2002). This pattern has been especially visible in the area of property rights with land privatization resulting in increasingly harmful threats to women's rights and well-being worldwide (Peña, Maiques, & Castillo, 2008). Issues of land tenure, specifically, have been impacted by global capitalism through neoliberal lending institutions (e.g., the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) that push for increased privatization of resources, thereby influencing "developing"<sup>2</sup> countries to move from customary (often communal) land systems to private land ownership (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997).

One of the consequences of the shift to privatized systems is an erosion of the few rights to land that women previously held under customary or cooperative systems (Deere & Leon, 2001; Englert & Daley, 2008). The theory of gender and power (Connell, 1987) postulates that institutionalized

gender-based inequalities grant men disproportionate power in society and result in male control and dominance in a number of areas including within their interpersonal relationships. It has been demonstrated that gender norms based on these power differences create a risk environment that legitimizes and perpetuates women's subordinate status and adversely influences their health and safety (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Jenkins, 2000; Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Because land ownership in "developing" countries reflects dominant roles and elevated status in the society, and is a sign of power and dominance, the social structures surrounding land ownership may help sustain gendered imbalances in power and ultimately put women at risk to experience violence (Deere & Leon, 2001).

A link between land ownership and gender-based violence was first introduced into the academic literature in 1994 along with the suggestion that formalizing property in a woman's name could lead to beneficial transformations in gender relations (Agarwal, 1994). Over a decade later, the first known published study in this area demonstrated that in Kerala, India, as many as 49% of women who did not own property experienced long-term physical violence compared with women who owned either land (18%) or a house (7%), as well as those who owned both assets (7%; Panda & Agarwal, 2005). The next known published study on this topic demonstrated that women's land ownership was related to a reduction in violence among women in Nicaragua, in part because it challenged traditional gender ideology (Grabe, 2010a). Others have reported similar findings in Kenya (Dworkin et al., 2013) and Nepal (Pandey, 2010). Although these studies collectively put forth a framework for investigating land ownership as an institutionalized social structure linked to women's vulnerability to violence, this line of inquiry remains largely underexplored. Moreover, not only have there been limited attempts to replicate these findings, but also few studies have examined the sociopsychological processes that may explain the role of land in reducing violence against women.

### *Relational Theory and the Social Dynamics of Power*

Several scholars have proposed theoretical approaches that illuminate the complex and dynamic social processes of gender and power that may explain threats to women's bodily safety (Connell, 2012; Heise, 1998). Relational theory in particular places central importance on the patterned relations between women and men by understanding gender as multidimensional, that is, with power relations operating simultaneously at institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels (Connell, 2009, 2012). In recent years, there has been increasing evidence from around the world that interpersonal power dynamics are related to domestic violence. Specifically, research consistently links men's power and control to women's experiences of violence in samples from Haiti (Gage & Hutchinson, 2006), India (Jejeebhoy, 1998), Mexico

(Castro, Casique, & Brindis, 2008), Nicaragua (Grose & Grabe, in press), Peru (Flake, 2005), the United States (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobsen, & Gottman, 1993; Coleman & Straus, 1986; Frieze & McHugh, 1992; Pulerwitz, Gortmaker, & DeJong, 2000), and South Africa (Dunkle et al., 2004; Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, & Shai, 2010). These findings are crucial to establishing gendered power as a pervasive worldwide phenomenon that puts women all over the globe at risk for violence. Still, a large gap in the empirical literature exists in our understanding of how men's greater access to institutional power intersects with interpersonal power to explain violence against women.

### *The Current Study*

Until recently, men's institutional power over land and interpersonal power over women have been addressed independent of each other (Grabe, 2010a). However, by investigating how the patterned relations between women and men develop to predict domestic violence, we examine the dynamic interplay between different structures of domination, as they occur at macro levels. We hypothesized that because ownership of land among women can substantially enhance their social status in regions where owning land is associated with dominance, it should be related to an increase in women's power and control within their marital relationships and with reduced levels of violence against women regardless of varying cultural contexts.

To investigate these hypotheses, we explored data from women who were members of two social organizations, one in Nicaragua and another in Tanzania. Both countries transitioned from predominantly 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 (Brogaard, 2009; Manji, 1998). Although the social and cultural contexts in each country vary, the political contexts surrounding land and gender are strikingly similar. For example, both of the women's organizations in the current study emerged from, and capitalized on, land rights movements that were considered the most radical in their respective regions (i.e., Central America: Deere & Leon, 2001; East Africa: Tripp, 2004). Moreover, land laws and policies in Nicaragua and Tanzania share a unique history in that they both reflect political struggles of women activists surrounding women's rights in land reform policies. Nevertheless, despite activist efforts in both locations, the process of privatizing land into individual titles largely has been based on customs that privilege men as owners of land, with women's access to land granted predominantly through marriage or a male relative (Deere & Leon, 2001; 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. Demonstrating links between landowning and women's power and well-being in two different regions of the Global South can lend even stronger support to the

hypothesis that macro-level structural power imbalances, regardless of other cultural differences, put women at risk for violence.<sup>3</sup> To date, no known studies have included a multi-country analysis that examines whether the proposed links are context- or country-specific or whether they may reflect larger processes that are more generalizable.

To accomplish the aims of our study, we embraced a pragmatist orientation characterized by a mixed-methods approach, rather than choosing between positivism and constructivism with regard to methodology, logic, and epistemology (Marecek, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). First, we quantitatively examined the links among land ownership, relationship power, and women's receipt of violence. We connected multiple levels of analysis to decenter any one aspect as primary (institutional structures or relationship dynamics) and focused instead on the processes linking power to violence. We included a qualitative component to look beyond the numbers; in other words, to gain a fuller understanding of how the social context and actual lived experience of women could help to explain the role of land ownership in reducing violence against women (Marecek, 2012). Integrating the qualitative component with quantitative analysis aligns with feminist principles that value the excavation of key voices and perspectives that have been kept silent, powerless, or subordinated (Stewart & Cole, 2007).

### **Quantitative Methods**

Because customary practices in both countries still largely prohibit women from owning land, our research was conducted in partnership with a woman's organization in each country that was facilitating women's land ownership as part of self-mobilized efforts aimed at women's empowerment. To establish the partnerships, a critical communicative methodology was followed. In this method, an egalitarian dialogue between the researcher and the leaders of the organizations 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).

In each country, the quantitative design was quasi-experimental<sup>4</sup> with an "intervention" group that included women who were landowners as beneficiaries of a program offered by the organization and a comparison group of women who served as "controls." The first author partnered with the organization Xochilt Acalt and a local research team in Nicaragua to design a survey that could examine how multiple structures of power related to women's receipt of violence. To construct the intervention group, 174 women were randomly selected to receive the survey from a list of 380 women who had participated in a land-titling program through the organization. Groups of 35 women, each from five surrounding communities who were not part of land intervention communities ( $n = 175$ ), were sampled for the control group. The final sample in Nicaragua consisted of 121 landowners and 146 non-landowners (total  $N = 267$ ).

**Table 1.** Sample Profile.

Variable	Nicaragua		Tanzania	
	Landowners (n = 121)	Nonlandowners (n = 146)	Landowners (n = 74)	Nonlandowners (n = 151)
Age (in years)				
M	46.37	42.49	45.24	39.02
SD	12.71	16.54	15.90	15.29
Range	20–82	17–86	19–80	17–84
Number of children				
M	4.84	4.01	5.76	4.98
SD	2.63	2.62	2.47	2.23
Range	0–12	0–13	1–12	1–12
Relationship status (% partnered)	74.4	77.4	98.6	100
Education (% at levels)				
No school	21.1	22.4	80.8	81.1
Primary	35.8	52.4	13.7	18.9
Secondary+	43.1	25.2	5.5	0
Literacy (% literate)	78.5	77.4	12.2	16.6

Note. There are no significant demographic differences between landowners and nonlandowners within each country. Because Maasai recognize age based on age-sets, we report only approximate ages.

The study design in Tanzania began with a similar partnership between the first author and the Maasai Women's Development Organization. Findings from the Nicaragua study were shared, and similarities and differences in the processes in each context were discussed. We used the survey from Nicaragua as a starting point and worked together with a local research team of Maasai women to establish which, if any, measures were culturally appropriate for Maasai women. We retained a small, but informative, selection of scales that would allow for a cross-country comparison (described below). In Tanzania, we used a list of 71 women receiving assistance in land titling to sample for the landowning group. A second group was constructed from a list of 150 women who had received empowerment interventions but did not own land.<sup>5</sup> To construct a control group, we used a list from a neighboring community that was slated to begin receiving interventions in the next year. To make the cross-country analyses comparable, we collapsed across the three groups of women in Tanzania to compare landowners ( $n = 74$ ) and non-landowners ( $n = 151$ ). The total sample size for quantitative analyses in Tanzania was 225 women. In each country, the groups of women were chosen from the same geographic locations in order to closely match the groups on a number of economic, social, and cultural variables.

In both countries, field procedures recommended by the WHO in conducting violence research in "developing" countries were followed to hire and train a local research team (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). The survey questionnaires were developed in partnership with the research team, translated into Spanish and Swahili by a member of the team, and then back-translated with a local speaker to ensure that the meanings were properly conveyed before the surveys were piloted. Due to low literacy rates in each country, the surveys were administered by locally trained research assistants.<sup>6</sup>

## Survey Measures

**Land ownership and relationship (partner) power.** Women were asked whether or not they owned land (landowners coded as 1; non-landowners as 0). Participants were asked whether their partners generally prohibit or control their abilities to carry out everyday activities (e.g., "visit family or friends") and whether they exhibit controlling behavior or jealousy (e.g., "insists on knowing where you are at all times") with 7 items from the WHO (2005). Two additional items were added to assess whether partners prevented women from working outside the home or studying. Affirmative responses were summed for a total score of controlling behaviors, with higher scores reflecting greater levels of *partner* power and control. The internal consistencies for this scale were  $\alpha = .89$  in Nicaragua and  $\alpha = .45$  in Tanzania.<sup>7</sup>

**Violence.** The Conflict Tactics Scale was used to measure physical and psychological violence in the previous 12 months (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Physical violence was assessed with 6 items that assessed receipt of violence in order of severity, including slapping or throwing objects; pushing, hitting, kicking, or dragging; choking; and the use or threat of a weapon. Psychological violence was assessed with 4 items indexing insults, humiliation, intimidation, and threats. A sum of reported behaviors in each area was taken as an index of violence. Because these scales were count scores, internal consistencies were not computed.

## Quantitative Results

### Descriptive Statistics

As can be seen in Table 1, there were no overall differences in landowners versus non-owners within country in

**Table 2.** Differences Between Landowners and Nonlandowners Within Nicaragua and Tanzania on Study Variables.

Variable	Nicaragua					Tanzania				
	Landowners ( <i>n</i> = 121)	Nonlandowners ( <i>n</i> = 146)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	Landowners ( <i>n</i> = 74)	Nonlandowners ( <i>n</i> = 151)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)				Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)			
Partner Power	1.38 (2.29)	2.26 (2.75)	7.88	.005	-.35	2.80 (1.41)	3.26 (1.67)	4.18	.042	-.30
Physical Violence	0.07 (.50)	0.15 (.60)	1.53	.218	-.15	0.38 (.75)	0.58 (1.00)	2.25	.135	-.23
Psychological Violence	0.37 (.89)	0.37 (.91)	0.00	.985	.00	0.41 (.76)	0.65 (1.04)	3.22	.074	-.26

Note: *d* = effect size. Effect sizes were computed to assess the magnitude of the difference between the groups. Effect sizes are calculated as the difference between two means divided by a pooled standardized deviation. According to Cohen (1988), an effect size of 0.20 might be considered small (although still a notable difference), whereas values around 0.50 are medium effects. A negative *d* for partner power indicates that landowners reported less partner power than nonlandowners. A negative *d* for the violence variables indicates that landowners reported less receipt of violence than nonlandowners.

**Table 3.** Correlations Among Study Variables.

	Correlations				Scale Range
	1	2	3	4	
1. Land Ownership	—	-.17**	-.08	.00	0–1
2. Partner Power	-.14*	—	.24**	.47**	0–9
3. Physical Violence	-.04	.24**	—	.60**	0–6
4. Psychological Violence	-.04	.24**	.53**	—	0–4

Note. Nicaragua findings are reported above the diagonal; Tanzania, below. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* ≤ .01. \*\*\**p* ≤ .001.

demographic characteristics. The average ages of the respondents in each sample were in the early to mid-40s, and the majority of the women in each country had more than four children. Approximately three quarters of the women surveyed in Nicaragua and almost all the women in Tanzania were in marital relationships. However, in Nicaragua, a substantially higher number of women had received early schooling and could read and write.

Tests comparing landowners and non-landowners within each country suggest that landowners differed from their non-landowning counterparts on several study variables (see Table 2). Specifically, landowners in both countries reported less partner power than non-landowners, and a trend for psychological violence in Tanzania that approaches significance (and has a notable effect size) suggests landowners in Tanzania reported less psychological violence than non-landowners. Moreover, as predicted, correlations within each country demonstrate that land ownership was related to partner power, and partner power was related to both physical and psychological violence in both countries (see Table 3).

### Preliminary Analyses

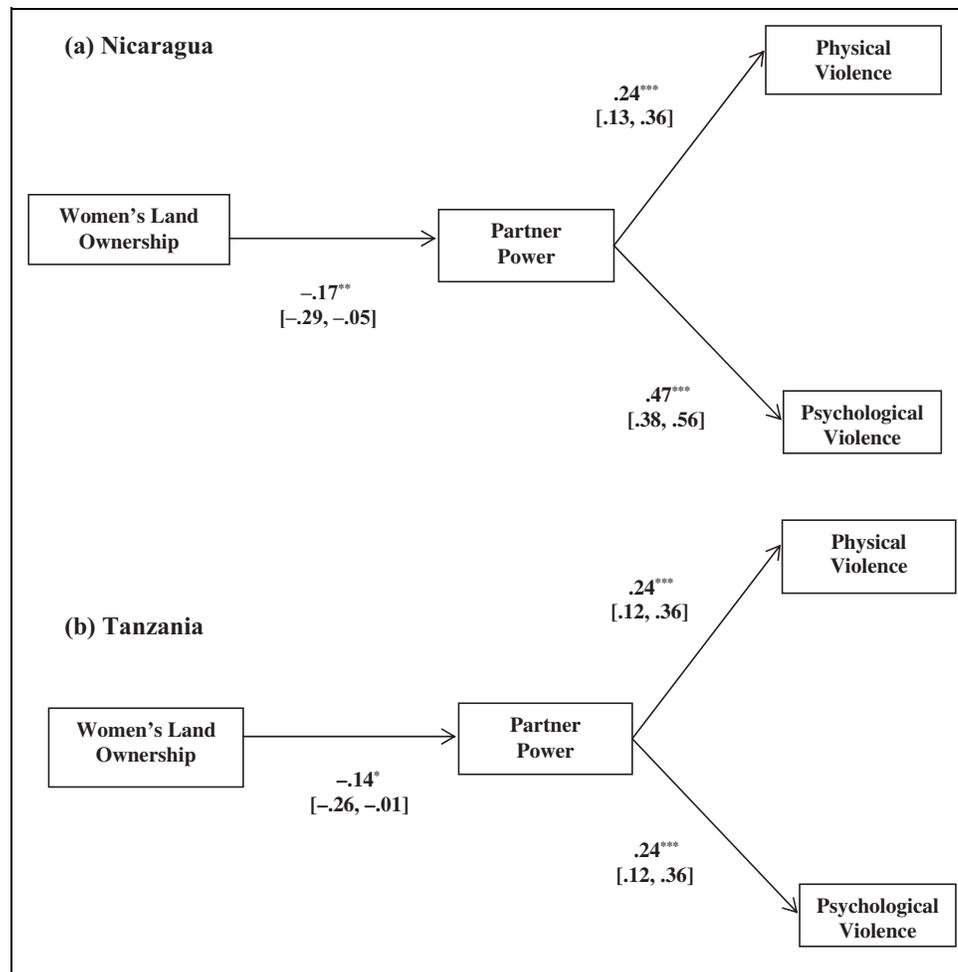
Tests of normality suggest that the physical and psychological violence variables were positively skewed in the samples from both Nicaragua (physical violence skewness was 2.39; psychological violence, 2.39) and Tanzania (physical

violence, 5.94; psychological violence, 2.62) indicating that, in general, participants reported low baseline rates of these experiences (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). This distribution was expected, given that base rates of lifetime violence are approximately 33% globally (WHO, 2005) and between 19.1% and 42% in the current sample. Because these data are not expected to meet assumptions of normality, the violence variables were not transformed. Tests of normality for all other variables did not indicate the need for transformation. We used sample size recommendations from Bentler and Chou (1987) to inform our considerations of the sample. Bentler and Chou recommend between a 5:1 and 10:1 ratio of participants to parameters for path analysis. Because stable estimates with non-normative data require larger sample sizes, we exceeded this recommendation. Specifically, we had 267 participants to 3 parameters in Nicaragua (89:1) and 225 participants to 3 parameters in Tanzania (75:1).

### Path Analyses

To test the relationships among the study variables, we constructed a path diagram in which land ownership was hypothesized to directly predict partner power, which was, in turn, hypothesized to predict physical and psychological violence in each country (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> The proposed models were estimated using Mplus 6.11 and Maximum Likelihood estimation procedures (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). Multiple fit indices were used as guides to evaluate whether the data were a good fit: the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA), and chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) goodness-of-fit statistics. A satisfactory fit is indicated by CFI values greater than 0.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), RMSEA values less than 0.08 with a 90% confidence interval (CI) that encompasses 0.05 (Steiger, 1990), and a nonsignificant  $\chi^2$  (Carmines & McIver, 1981).

Because a central aim of our study was to test whether the process relating land ownership to violence is similar across countries, we followed the multigroup procedures recommended by Holmbeck (1997). First, we assessed the model fit within each country. Next, we specified two simultaneous



**Figure 1.** The hypothesized model in (a) Nicaragua and (b) Tanzania with standardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals in brackets. In both countries, land ownership predicts lower levels of partner power. Higher levels of partner power, in turn, predict greater receipt of physical and psychological violence in both countries.  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**Table 4.** Goodness-of-Fit Statistics for the Hypothesized Models.

Model Specified	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	$\chi^2 p$ value	CFI	RMSEA [CI]
1. Nicaragua Model	5.47	2	2.73	.065	0.982	.081 [.000, .165]
2. Tanzania Model	2.03	2	1.02	.363	1.00	.008 [.000, .133]
3. Freely Estimated Model	7.50	4	1.96	.112	0.988	.060 [.000, .125]
4. Constrained Model	16.58	7	2.44	.020	0.967	.075 [.028, .122]

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean squared error of approximation; CI = 90% confidence interval for RMSEA; df = degrees of freedom.

between-group models: the first in which the predicted pathways between the countries were freely estimated (the pathways could vary across country) and a second in which the predicted pathways were constrained to be equal across countries. To test for similarity across countries, we compared the resultant  $\chi^2$  for the freely estimated and constrained models.

Results suggest that the data fit the models well (see Table 4 for fit statistics). The models within each country

explained an amount of the variance that reached or approached significance in physical (Nicaragua: 6%;  $p = .035$ ; Tanzania: 6%;  $p = .057$ ) and psychological violence (Nicaragua: 22%;  $p < .001$ ; Tanzania: 6%;  $p = .057$ ). Moreover, all hypothesized relationships were significant in both countries. Women's land ownership was significantly related to lower levels of partner power and partner power was, as predicted, related to receipt of physical and psychological violence against women.

To test explicitly whether land ownership was indirectly related to reduced receipt of violence, tests of indirect effects were analyzed using bootstrapping procedures with 5,000 resamples as recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Results from these tests provided significant support for the indirect effect of land ownership on lowered levels of physical ( $B = -.05$ , 95% CI  $[-.12, -.01]$ ) and psychological violence ( $B = -.15$ , 95% CI  $[-.30, -.04]$ ) in Nicaragua as well as on physical ( $B = -.06$ , 95% CI  $[-.18, -.00]$ ) and psychological violence ( $B = -.06$ , 95% CI  $[-.18, -.01]$ ) in Tanzania. Because the absence of zero in the confidence intervals reflects that there is a significant indirect effect present, these results suggest that women's land ownership and violence were related in both countries, in part, because structural changes in land ownership were directly related to interpersonal power within women's relationships.

Next, we ran the simultaneous between-group models to statistically compare the process across countries (the fit statistics for the two simultaneous between-group models are shown in Table 4). The  $\chi^2$  test comparing the freely estimated and constrained models was significant, indicating that a difference between the two countries existed in at least one of the proposed pathways,  $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 9.081$ ,  $p = .028$ . To locate the difference, we tested the individual pathways by constraining each one individually (while allowing the others to be free) and examining the  $\chi^2$  difference test for each hypothesized path. Findings from these tests suggested that, despite being significant in both countries, the links between land ownership and control,  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 7.90$ ,  $p = .019$ , and relationship power and psychological violence,  $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 8.88$ ;  $p = .012$ , varied across the two locations. In addition, as can be seen in Figure 1, the 95% CIs between power and psychological violence in Nicaragua (Figure 1a;  $[0.38, 0.56]$ ) and Tanzania (Figure 1b;  $[0.12, 0.36]$ ) did not overlap, suggesting variance across the two locations. The CIs for the link between land ownership and partner control do not offer the same evidence of variance, demonstrating instead largely overlapping CIs (Nicaragua  $[-0.29, -0.05]$ ; Tanzania  $[-0.26, -0.01]$ ). Although evidence for statistical variance in two pathways in the proposed model indicates stronger significance in Nicaragua than Tanzania, it is important to note that stronger significance does not demonstrate a more robust relationship. As Cohen (1990) points out, higher significance levels simply allow us to more confidently reject the null hypothesis. As such, because the proposed pathways are all significant in both countries, the overall findings suggest that the process by which women's land ownership relates to lower levels of physical and psychological violence operates similarly in each country.

## Qualitative Methods

Qualitative interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of how owning land was related to life experiences for women in each community. Following guidelines

for qualitative interviewing, a subset of 20 women from each country was targeted for semistructured interviews (Francis et al., 2010). Comparable numbers of women from each land-owning group within each country were selected with the help of the local research team to reflect the age, diversity, and location in which they lived. Once saturation was achieved, the interviews ceased (Francis et al., 2010). All interviews were completed by the first author with the aid of an interpreter. Nineteen women were interviewed in Nicaragua and 14 women were interviewed in Tanzania.<sup>9</sup> See Table 5 for demographic information about the women interviewed and for ID identifiers for the individuals quoted in the present article.

The interviews took place in women's homes and were conducted in either Spanish or Maa with the aid of an interpreter who was knowledgeable of the research methods and goals of the study. The interviews consisted of questions asking women about their relationships with their partners, daily experiences and roles performed in their households, and experiences with, and perspectives on, women's land rights. Women were also asked about the dominant perspectives on marital violence and women's ownership of land held in their community.

To better understand the mechanisms by which institutional and interpersonal power related to women's lived experience, thematic analysis was used to identify "themes," or patterns, that repeatedly occurred within the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To begin coding interviews, five interviews each from Nicaragua and Tanzania were randomly selected and independently evaluated using an open coding process by the second and third authors. Extensive notes were taken throughout, and independent lists of codes were developed. All three authors then met as a group to discuss the initial codes and determine a unified list of codes. Next, an additional 10 interviews, 5 from each country, were coded using the initial list in order to determine full refinement of the codes. All three authors met again to discuss refinement of the codes until consensus was met. Upon developing the completed coding scheme, consensus coding was used to analyze all the interviews (Ahrens, 2006). This involved the second and third authors independently coding each of the interviews and then meeting to compare results. Any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. For the purposes of the present article, we focused our analyses on the themes related to land in processes that reduced violence.

## Qualitative Results

### *The Transformative Potential of Land*

Although there were differences in the ways women discussed their experiences both within and between the two sites, land ownership was identified as having the transformative potential to alter the contexts in which women lived.

**Table 5.** Sample Profile for the Qualitative Participants.

Nicaragua				Tanzania			
ID	Landowner	Age	Village/Municipality	ID	Landowner	Age <sup>a</sup>	Village/Municipality
21	Yes	82	El Madrono	2	No	50s	Oltukai
27	Yes	32	San Claudio	111	No	40s	Oltukai
28	Yes	52	San Claudio	193	No	40s	Oltukai
60	Yes	42	La Sabaneta	194	Yes	20s	Oltukai
122	Yes	39	El Pinuelar	311	No	40s	Longido
129	Yes	43	El Pinuelar	333	No	50s	Longido
147	Yes	57	El Pinuelar	353	Yes	30s	Longido
168	Yes	37	El Pinuelar	356	Yes	30s	Longido
260	No	82	Santa Teresa	511	Yes	30s	Kimokowa
271	Yes	42	Santa Teresa	517	No	20s	Kimokowa
403	No	78	Calle Real	599	Yes	50s	Kimokowa
417	No	28	Calle Real	606	No	20s	Kimokowa
425	No	40	Calle Real	800	No	40s	Engarenaibor
436	No	47	Paragua	801	No	30s	Engarenaibor
450	No	18	Paragua				
455	No	25	Paragua				
462	No	35	Paragua				
472	No	34	El Parasio				
474	No	50	El Parasio				

Note. <sup>a</sup>Because Maasai recognize age based on age-sets, we report only approximate ages.

Women in both countries connected owning property to increased power and status within their communities and to having greater control within their relationships.

As suggested earlier, the exclusion of women as property owners in land privatization efforts enforced and strengthened men's dominant position while exacerbating women's dependence on their husbands. In Nicaragua, several women suggested that the power accompanying land ownership interrupted gender norms by reformulating power relations between women and men, thereby decreasing women's dependence. For example, one woman discussed how owning land relieved her of the traditional arrangements that had previously fostered reliance on her husband:

[Landowners] are looked upon as being in a better situation because they've got land that they can work on to produce . . . if you have your own little house and your own plot of land then you are much happier in your life because you don't have to depend only on your husband. [P #129]

Through owning land women had the ability to create opportunities for themselves and enhance their livelihood, independent of their husbands. Additionally, many women explained that owning land provided them with a source of security. Rather than being forced to depend on a male partner for shelter and sustenance, a landowning woman could provide for herself without resources or support of a male partner.

Furthermore, women in Nicaragua discussed how owning land enhanced the perceived and actualized power and status of women at both the community and household level. The majority of women interviewed connected the structural

power afforded by land to increased respect from their husbands and to an enhanced ability to make decisions that impacted their lives. For example, one woman shared:

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 he wants to do or whatever and I say what I think about it, if I agree with it or not. So I'm taken into account and we make decisions between the two of us . . . Even the way he speaks has to be different (Laughs). [P #168]

As the above-mentioned quote exemplifies, owning land provided women with resources of their own and therefore the power to negotiate within their relationships. Women's increased ability to hold something of tangible value transferred into an increased valuing of women's contributions and capabilities within their relationships.

In Tanzania, women similarly discussed the role of land in bringing women to power within their relationships. However, unlike Nicaragua, because women's land ownership is relatively new in Tanzania, several women discussed the transformative potential of land. For example, one woman shared how owning land would grant her more autonomy and an ability to make decisions in areas that affected her life:

I will be able to use my land as I want . . . I will harvest and sell and buy whatever I want, maybe some livestock . . . It will help me also, maybe from everything I earn from that farm, [I will be able] to solve my own problem, and then [send] my children for schooling, and some little things [that] I need, too. [P #511]

Thus, owning land was perceived as having the potential to create new opportunities for women, equipping them with material power to create change in their lives. This finding was particularly important in Tanzania because in Maasai culture it is not normative for women to own property. Rather, all possessions of the family are considered the property of the husband, and status as a property owner, in part, affords one status and rights within the community. Thus, landowning has the potential to elevate women to property-owning status, thereby positioning them as more agentic and deserving of rights.

Indeed, like in Nicaragua, many women in Tanzania also explained how land could enhance the perceived status and respect of women. However, given the cultural connection between property owning and rights in Maasai land, women in Tanzania drew even stronger connections between property ownership and status than did women in Nicaragua. Demonstrating that several women believed owning land could shift the way women are perceived in the community, one woman explained: “It’s a good thing because you will be owning your property . . . It will only be yours . . . because she is now a respected woman she is having . . . her own property. All men must respect you because you are holding something good” [P #2]. Thus, owning property was associated with increasing both women’s material wealth and women’s status. In particular, women’s capacity to hold something of value substantiated their inherent worth and capabilities and deemed them worthy of respect in their relationships and in the community.

### *Land Ownership and Violence Reduction*

As the examples mentioned earlier highlight, property ownership interrupted sociocultural structures of male power by strengthening women’s ability to address their needs independent of their husbands. As a result, many women explained how lessened dependence resulted in reductions in violence. In Nicaragua, for example, several women explained that the shift in power afforded by land could increase women’s security. The experience of increased power and autonomy was particularly important because many women associated these with the opportunity to leave an abusive partner:

It’s good that women should be owners of their land. Because, when a man may take over and they are owners of everything and they run women out of the home. But it’s now a good thing that women are, are now owners of their own land because now they can then run away, run the men off if they betray them. [P #260]

In another interview a woman described what this restructuring of power looked like:

Interviewer: Have any women [landowners] done that? Kicked the man out?

Respondent: Here, not yet, no.

I: But the men are worried about it?

R: They are scared yes. And the ones who mistreated their women before don’t do that now. [P #129]

Land ownership enhanced women’s safety and security by expanding their ability to provide for themselves through material resources and the freedom from having to stay with violent partners. And, importantly, the interviews suggest that both men and women understood the implications of women’s enhanced power. Specifically, most women did not report that their reduction in violence was due to leaving abusive situations. Instead, most explained a shift in the way they were perceived and treated by their husbands that led to a new reality in which male behaviors that exerted violence and control were no longer socially acceptable.

Similar to the processes demonstrated in Nicaragua, in Tanzania women suggested that restructured power dynamics associated with land ownership were related to women’s receipt of violence. Women frequently made connections between men’s dominant position as property owners and their “right” to exert violence. Several women discussed how land ownership would interrupt women’s susceptibility to experiencing violence. One woman explained how this process operated:

[The beating] will stop and it will help most of the women because as I told you from the [beginning] the [men are] always finding out the reason to beat a woman. But if he finds out you have your own place, and you produce from your own place, he won’t have any right to come and bother you in your own place. Those time[s] 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 can’t be able. [P #599]

As landowners women would no longer be perceived as property, thereby interrupting men’s opportunity to treat them as such. The interviews suggest that land ownership was related to violence reduction because it shifted women’s actualized and perceived status in their relationships and communities.

In summary, changes in power dynamics between women and their partners reflected multifaceted experiences and varied from woman to woman. However, women consistently connected institutional contexts and power relations to their lived experience. Interviews with women in both Nicaragua and Tanzania illustrated that land ownership was frequently connected to the restructuring of power in marital relationships that allowed women greater freedom from violence.

## **Discussion**

Although the contexts in each country are inarguably different, the quantitative and qualitative outcomes in each location are strikingly similar—namely that women’s land ownership

challenges traditional relationship power dynamics and is associated with reduced levels of physical and psychological violence. Demonstrating the findings in two different regions reflects the robust nature of how intersections of multiple systems of power may reduce violence against women in contexts where gendered power imbalances have been exacerbated by neoliberal policies. Furthermore, the results provide a lens through which to better understand the ways gendered violence is being negotiated and challenged by women in the Global South.

The combined use of quantitative and qualitative techniques adds strength to our study's findings. The primary advantage of the quantitative data is that large samples and a comparative analysis offer something by way of generalizability that qualitative data cannot. Moreover, the indirect effects demonstrating that relationship power explains how institutionalized power relates to women's receipt of violence lend evidence to the idea that individuals embody social relationships and processes (Connell, 2012). This is important in light of knowing that most approaches to women's human rights are centered on categorical thinking (i.e., focusing on disparities between women and men separately) rather than on gendered processes that impact women. This may perhaps explain why legal advances in women's rights have not been matched by significant progress in women's lived experience. Our quantitative findings underscore that taking the dynamic nature of power into account is imperative.

The qualitative data, on the other hand, allowed us to examine how land ownership shapes everyday gender relations in two locations. In particular, women's explanations more clearly flesh out the patterned nature of gendered relations and the mechanisms by which land ownership leads to changes in relationship power and violence in these two locations. Specifically, the women described how structural power is related to factors such as dependence and decision making within the marital relationship, both of which were associated with women's vulnerability to violence. Furthermore, the women's testimonies make evident the causal nature of these processes by illustrating that it was not women with already existing high levels of relationship power who became landowners (Maxwell, 2004). The qualitative data underscore that when institutionalized male dominance is interrupted, significant changes in interpersonal power result that directly predict women's experience of violence.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

Given the potential for Western scholarship to further legitimize structures of domination, it is important to critically question the potential and limitations of the model being offered in our article. First, the comparative analysis engaged in the current study is positioned to draw some "universal" implications. However, a growing number of scholars and activists have become wary of the dominance of universal rights-based approaches to social justice, highlighting that

Western-defined "universals" are a contemporary form of imperial intervention. In particular, Western rights-based approaches to justice that privilege the individual and the law often make it difficult to recognize and address the structural causes of gender injustice (Hodgson, 2011). By taking a structural approach, rather than an individual focus defined by Western norms, we demonstrate that it is important to recognize both institutional (i.e., land) and cultural (i.e., relational dynamics) structures of domination in women's rights violations. In doing so, we have demonstrated that macro-level processes involving resources and power may operate similarly across different contexts while at the same time allowing for the processes to be identified by local values.

It is also possible that creating a study design that facilitated a cross-country analysis may have introduced study limitations, in particular regarding the psychometric properties of the scales we employed. For example, it is plausible that the low reliability for relationship power in the Tanzania sample may explain why the link between power and psychological violence was stronger in Nicaragua than in Tanzania. However, it is also possible that a longer history of land ownership among the women in Nicaragua, relative to the women in Tanzania, may explain the more robust finding. It is also true that only a small percentage of variance in violence was explained in the proposed models, suggesting that additional factors related to women's marginalization (e.g., employment and income) need to be taken into account for a full understanding of what puts women at risk. Future research examining additional factors may facilitate a deeper understanding of gendered relationships in these contexts.

### *Practice Implications*

Despite our study's limitations, the findings have promising potential for informing both practical intervention and theory. Moreover, the study findings are timely. They illustrate the mechanisms by which altered structural changes—namely women's land ownership in contexts that challenge gendered power—can bring about profound social and psychological change for women at a time when gender-based violence is receiving unprecedented levels of international attention. Still, because worldwide NGOization (Alvarez, 2009) of women's rights has served, in part, to depoliticize feminist agendas, we wish to guard against the co-optation of these findings by a neoliberal agenda. In the current study, the organizations' strategic use of women's land ownership was informed by self-mobilized grassroots efforts in the Global South that critique colonial, capitalist, and gender oppressions in a manner that strategically addresses policies and norms that substantiate male power and control rather than conforming to a neoliberal agenda focused solely on privatization. Our findings importantly demonstrate that organizations should be informed by marginalized voices that can, and ought to, determine their own agendas for liberation.

## Conclusion

Given the robust nature of our findings (namely, that the same process was found in two different countries, with nearly 500 women, and that qualitative data underscored the intersectional nature of power), our findings lend strong evidence to the processes articulated by the theory of gender and power (Connell, 1987, 2012). In particular, our findings illustrate the social dynamics of gender by linking institutional power to interpersonal relationships in a manner that both explains structures and processes that put women at risk and also holds promise for change. Finally, we believe that the framework offered in our article has much to offer socially marginalized communities that are working for women's human rights in an increasingly globalized world.

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## Authors' Note

Key academic collaborators in the administration of these projects included Carlos Arenas, director of the then Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua, and Dr. Mara Goldman, assistant professor of Geography at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Similar findings from the Nicaragua sample have been previously published, but are being reproduced here because they allow for a new research question in a larger program of research.

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## Notes

1. The term Global South is not meant as a geographical reference. It reflects the socioeconomic and political divide between wealthy, "developed" countries, known collectively as the North, and the poorer countries that are exploited in processes of globalization. It is a term meant to circumvent some of the implied inferiority that "Third World" invokes.
2. According to the United Nations, there is no singularly recognized definition of a developed country. Former Secretary General Kofi Annan (2000, p. 2) defined a developed country as "one that allows all of its citizens to enjoy a free and healthy life in a safe environment." However, many industrialized countries

do not meet this criterion, and the terms developed, underdeveloped, and developing are often used by the so-called First-World nations to describe the relatively low economic well-being of another country in a manner that implies inferiority. Thus, when used in our article the term "developing" appears in quotations to reflect the problematic nature discussed here.

3. A subset of the Nicaragua data has previously been published (Grabe, 2010a) but is being reanalyzed here to allow for a cross-country comparison of the hypothesized relations.
4. Because violence was the outcome under investigation, random assignment to intervention conditions was not ethical. Moreover, given that the organizations were part of grassroots mobilization and not clinical trials set up for program evaluation, rigid control of the conditions was not practical. A quasi-experimental design was chosen to address the practicalities of field research while allowing us to investigate the research questions.
5. Because the study design in Tanzania built upon the work that had already been conducted in Nicaragua, we added an empowerment-only group to the study design to allow us to examine whether unique effects could be attributed to land ownership over and above those offered by empowerment interventions. These analyses are not the focus of the current study.
6. In Nicaragua, survey administration was done in Spanish; in Tanzania, in Maa. However, because Maa is not a written language, the survey was written in Swahili and orally administered in Maa. The research assistants were all bilingual and received extensive training in translating the written interview during administration.
7. We dropped several scales and items that were part of the originally published Nicaragua findings (Grabe, 2010a) to allow for the cross-country comparison. Specifically, we did not retain measures of organizational participation, gender ideology, partner control, or sexual violence, and we omitted 2 items from the relationship power scale. Regarding the relationship power scale in Tanzania, it is possible that the low internal consistency reflects limitations in designing the scale based on prior work, but we include the scale in analyses because (a) it demonstrates stronger predictive validity with other variables than the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  would suggest and (b) the qualitative data lend strong support to the mechanisms offered in the quantitative findings.
8. The variables were hypothesized in this order for three reasons: (a) the theoretical framework used to develop the manuscript emphasizes power inequalities at macro and micro levels; (b) the previously published analyses from Nicaragua examined alternative path models and meditational analyses that support this order (Grabe, 2010a); and (c) the structural equation models are accompanied by qualitative findings that can lend further support to the mechanisms at play.
9. Because of excessive wind interference on the recording of 1 interview, only 18 interviews were included for analysis in Nicaragua.

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