

## Community intervention in the societal inequity of women's political participation: The development of efficacy and citizen participation in rural Nicaragua

Shelly Grabe & Anjali Dutt

To cite this article: Shelly Grabe & Anjali Dutt (2019): Community intervention in the societal inequity of women's political participation: The development of efficacy and citizen participation in rural Nicaragua, Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community, DOI: [10.1080/10852352.2019.1627080](https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2019.1627080)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2019.1627080>



Published online: 26 Jun 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Community intervention in the societal inequity of women's political participation: The development of efficacy and citizen participation in rural Nicaragua

Shelly Grabe<sup>a</sup> and Anjali Dutt<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

### ABSTRACT

Globally, limited opportunities for women's political participation and decision-making reflect a widespread societal problem perpetuated through gender inequities that operate at numerous levels of society. Challenging and ending systemic gender-based power imbalances is critical to understanding the potential for women's political participation. The current study uses a liberation psychology approach to examine how a community intervention interrupts traditional gender ideology, enhances women's agency and political efficacy, and increases civic engagement and community leadership among women in rural Nicaragua. Research was conducted in partnership with a grassroots women's organization and data were taken from 261 surveys. Findings suggest that community-level interventions interrupt standard notions of women's political participation, resulting in greater agency and efficacy and thereby higher levels of decision-making and leadership. The findings illustrate the importance of assessing the psychosocial processes involved in transformative political spaces that facilitate women's meaningful citizen engagement, having important implications for women's political participation worldwide.

### KEYWORDS

Citizen engagement; community intervention; liberation psychology; Nicaragua; women's political participation

Politics should be understood as the possibility and impossibility for ... actions and knowledge to be known and implemented so as to affect the distribution of power, and domination. (Montero, 2009, p. 150).

In many places globally, opportunities for women to participate politically are restricted due to gendered inequities in the distribution of power and resources, limiting women's opportunities to participate as public decision-makers (Grabe, 2015). Moreover, spaces of political power often invoke both overt and tacit forms of discrimination by employing stereotypes about women's capabilities, thereby silencing them or keeping them from entering politics at all (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). Indeed, when considering women's ability to participate in political spaces, several scholars

suggest that key relationships of power shape women's inequality and citizen participation (Sánchez & Martín-Sevillano, 2006).

In recent years, efforts to enhance women's political participation have gained increasing urgency throughout the globe; in part, because women's representation in politics is an indicator of empowerment, outlined in both the United Nations Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals. As a result, in the past three decades, the global average of women in representative governmental positions increased from less than 9% in 1987 to 23% in 2016 (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; World Bank, 2017). Several scholars have suggested, however, that the changing political landscape for women throughout the world offers predominately nominal support for their involvement and often does so without considering the gendered inequities and discrimination that women confront (Mohanty, 2007; White, 1996).

Trying to understand women's citizen participation without considering the structures and norms that enable or limit women's participation is not enough to create viable routes to gender justice (Hodgson, 2011). The current study takes a liberation psychology approach to understand women's citizen participation by examining how an intervention stemming from community-level resistance among women who have been excluded from political spaces allows for meaningful participation in community decision-making (Andrews, 2006; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Sánchez & Martín-Sevillano, 2006). In particular, this study assesses a community intervention aimed at challenging traditional gender ideology, thereby enhancing women's autonomy and political efficacy, and increasing civic engagement and community leadership.

### **Community psychology and women's citizen participation**

Constructing citizenship and strengthening civil society are at the political core of community psychology (Montero, 2009). In particular, issues of community intervention, liberation, empowerment, and citizen participation have been of long-standing interest in community psychology. Yet, despite several decades of focused attention to these topics, investigations that center women's experiences are notably underexplored (Bond & Mulvey, 2000).<sup>1</sup> However, several feminist psychologists working in communities have called for investigations that capture the ways in which women resist to ultimately challenge power-based structural constraints to create conditions of gendered justice (Brodsky, 2009; Grabe, 2012; 2016; 2017; Grabe, Dutt, & Dworkin, 2014; Lykes & Moane, 2009; Moane, 2003). This approach is compatible with 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

(e.g. gender inequity) that disadvantage them (Brodsky et al., 2012; Moane, 2003). Indeed, Montero (2007) argues that liberation is not given, but constructed by those needing and facilitating it.

Empowerment is one framework in community psychology that has been used to understand the development of personal control and freedom, whereby individuals gain agency and mastery over issues of concern to them and are supported by access to and control over resources (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment theory explicitly links well-being with larger social and political contexts and integrates a critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995). Although there is abundant literature that suggests that empowerment is a “process” whereby multiple components influence each other, much empirical research does not identify the multiple components or the links among them (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Grabe, 2012; Kabeer, 1999).

In considering aims of liberation and social justice, community psychologists have suggested that focusing on citizen participation as a form of empowerment is an important pursuit in research and intervention for several reasons (Perkins, 1995). First, behavioral outcomes of empowerment – such as participation – can be measured more directly than the psychological dimensions of the process. Early conceptualizations and investigations of empowerment within psychology focused primarily on individual psychological components, thereby giving limited attention to context and social structures (Perkins, 1995; Riger, 1993). Because empowerment in community psychology is firmly rooted in a social action framework that links individual strengths and competencies and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change, investigating citizen participation presses us to think beyond empowerment at the individual level (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Behavioral participation – measured in the current study as civic engagement and community leadership – inherently extend beyond the individual to reflect interactions with community members or organizations.

Second, in overcoming societal obstacles such as gender inequity, many critical psychologists have identified the need for research in partnership with communities that employ community-driven interventions targeting outcomes whereby power is more equitably distributed (Prilleltensky, 2008). Although the process of engendering democracy throughout the world by increasing women’s representation may be necessary, alone it does not sufficiently address women’s political “participation” (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). In other words, when women’s inclusion is predominately nominal or tokenized, women may have little influence over meaningful participation that includes decision-making (Mohanty, 2007; White, 1996).

Because the possibility of overcoming societal inequity inherently involves participating in political spaces by playing an active role in controlling resources and decisions in one's community (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988), the study of women's citizen participation needs to consider: (1) the role of community-based interventions that address societal gender inequities, (2) an examination of the psychosocial processes that lead to meaningful levels of participation and (3) citizen participation outcomes that reflect engagement and decision-making among women.

Although empowerment has been conceptualized in the literature as an iterative process whereby relationships between components are likely reciprocal, there is also evidence to suggest that there are pathways to empowerment – in other words, changes in resources and agency – that lead to positive outcomes (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Dutt & Grabe, 2017; Grabe, 2012; Kabeer, 1999). Moreover, psychologists studying processes that facilitate sustainable, justice-oriented social change have noted the role of empowering settings in catalyzing change towards both individual and societal ends (Case & Hunter, 2012; Dutt & Grabe, 2014; Grabe, 2010; Maton, 2008; Rappaport, 1987). Empowering settings are organized spaces developed to support marginalized individuals in order to gain greater control over their lives, resources and their environment (Maton & Salem, 1995). Although an empowering setting may be conceptualized as the catalyst, the setting alone does not lead to empowering processes without the emergence of transformed ideology. Due to cultural ideology (i.e. social rules and values that govern norms) plays a critical role in how gender inequities are sustained (Glick & Fiske, 1999), interventions related to women's citizen participation need to interrupt traditional beliefs about gender and create space for women to learn about their rights.

Through the provision of a support system, space and a culture that promotes societal equity, empowering settings can also enhance capacities for individuals working toward more equitable realities (Freire, 1972; Maton & Salem, 1995). Gaining a sociopolitical awareness of one's rights by interrupting traditional gender ideology is a critical and fundamental condition for empowerment and participation. However, it needs to be coupled with the agency—the general capacity of actors to define their own goals and to take purposeful action (Bandura, 2006; Kabeer, 1999). In addition, a great deal of research demonstrates the role of political efficacy in predicting individuals involvement in efforts to produce social change across a variety of social contexts (e.g. Beaumont, 2011; Emig, Hesse & Fisher, 1996; Quimby & Angelique, 2011; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Therefore, we hypothesize that participation in a community-driven intervention will shift traditional notions of gender ideology, thereby facilitating greater levels of agency and political efficacy among women, both of which we expect

to relate to meaningful levels of women's civic engagement and community leadership. Although the investigation of empowering processes that exist between organizational and individual levels of analyses remain in the nascent stages (Grabe, 2012; Speer, Peterson, Armstead, & Allen, 2013), the current study provides a critical opportunity for understanding the structural and individual elements of empowerment that may explain the development of women's citizen participation.

### **The social context**

The international women's movement created arenas in which women all over the world began to assert varied concerns and take advantage of opportunities for political participation that were emerging in the 1990s (Tripp, 2003). This was occurring at the same time that countries throughout the world witnessed a rise in political upheaval out of an interest for more democratic or revolutionary governments (Pateman, 2012). In the 1970s in Nicaragua, the Sandinista Liberation Front mobilized in opposition to a dictatorship to improve the situation of people in a region marked by egregious social and economic inequalities. The Sandinistas took power in 1979 and the social revolution that followed throughout the 1980s became a celebrated example, in part, because of the unprecedented levels of women who participated in the struggle. In fact, women's participation in the Sandinista Revolution was lauded as more substantive than any other revolution during the time. Women made up approximately 30% of the Sandinista combat forces and were appointed to senior positions in the government after the Sandinistas gained power (Kampwirth, 1996; Molyneux, 1985).

However, many of these women came to understand gender oppression as profoundly cultural, crosscutting all public and private discourses and spaces, including those of the male-dominated revolution, where women and their "issues" were too often consigned to the sidelines (Molyneux, 1985). Therefore, by the late 1980s, a fledgling women's movement had begun to organize, driven by women whose experiences in the Sandinista Movement gave them a greater consciousness surrounding inequity, yet for whom the dominant ideology subjugated. As the hierarchical, patriarchal culture on the left came to be identified as part of the problem, women activists declared the need to invent new ways of doing politics (Grabe, 2016). In particular, questioning the social roots of women's disadvantage led many to consider a political separation from the Sandinistas, to formulate their own agendas based on the rights of women.

As a result, women in Nicaragua organized within the "Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres" (Autonomous Women's Movement) to create

strategic structural changes that would allow for women's citizen participation – in other words, the political participation of ordinary citizens in their society. The women's movement provided the strategic space to mobilize a membership of 150 women's organizations throughout the country united in their resistance to the structural inequities rooted in the gender that prohibited women's equal involvement in politics. The organization initiating the community intervention in the current study is part of the women's movement in Nicaragua. In this way, Nicaragua provides an excellent context for understanding how community intervention facilitates the development of women's political participation.

## **Current study**

In many locations women have organized to resist structural barriers to political participation and have pushed back in areas where the nominal or token representation of women detracts from the reality of women in meaningful decision-making positions. However, to date, processes of resistance that have fueled individuals committed to collective action aimed at social justice for women has received only limited attention from the discipline of psychology (Grabe, 2016). This may be in part because mainstream Western feminist psychology has largely neglected the voices of marginalized women and women of Color in understanding feminist dynamics of resistance and oppression (see Cole & Stewart, 1996; Grabe, 2016; Grabe et al., 2014; Lykes, Beristain, & Pérez-Armiñan, 2007 for exceptions). Moreover, much prior research in the academic disciplines that address women's injustice takes a linear approach that identifies discernable problems (e.g. violence) and empowering outcomes (e.g. newly administered laws). The current study, instead, examines the psychosocial “processes” involved in building political efficacy that is critical to creating transformative change that is necessary for addressing the problems surrounding gender inequity. In particular, we hypothesize that participation in a community intervention enhances women's citizen participation (i.e. civic engagement and community leadership) via its influence on gender ideology, agency, and political efficacy.

## **Method**

### **Setting**

The research was conducted in partnership with a woman's community organization in rural Nicaragua, the “Xochitl Acalt” Women's Center, which was part of the larger women's movement. “Xochitl Acalt” challenges gendered structural inequities by using social and political means to

educate, serve and advocate for women's health and human rights through community mobilization. Within the mainstream global women's movement "Xochitl Acalt" is revolutionary in that women are mobilized as agents of their own liberation through solidarity with others and resist imposed international agendas. It formed shortly after a shift in presidential power in 1990 brought with it neoliberal structural adjustments and, as a result, severe cutbacks to public sector commitments that infringed on women's rights. The community organization evolved to address health concerns and rights violations confronting women when they lack institutional power. We focus on the organization's civic engagement program.

### ***Civic engagement intervention***

The civic engagement program was founded in 2001 with the intention of increasing women's capacity to participate in community decision-making and leadership. The development of the program was organized around five goals: (1) creating space to promote consciousness around gender inequity; (2) developing an understanding of democratic participation; (3) offering tools and techniques for community leadership development; (4) defining strategies to engage local government officials in the promotion of human development and agendas addressing practical and strategic interests related to gender and (5) developing an organization of women for ongoing local political negotiation.

The civic engagement intervention involved workshops that were run in local communities by women who had attended the workshops in the past and completed training at "Xochitl Acalt." Although there was flexibility and variability in the focus and structure of each individual workshop, the values grounding the workshops centered around the program goals. Additionally, the workshops were structured in the tradition of Paulo Freire's theories of social change, focusing on enhancing knowledge about rights and social change through dialogical consciousness raising processes.

### ***Participants***

Data were collected during February and March of 2015 through collaboration with the "Xochitl Acalt" as part of a larger study on feminist community mobilization. Participants in this study were 261 women ranging from 18 to 77 years of age, who were living in Malpaisillo-Larreynaga at the time of data collection. Roughly half of the women ( $n = 112$ ) had participated in the civic engagement program facilitated by "Xochitl Acalt;" the comparison half ( $n = 149$ ) were women residing in nearby communities where "Xochitl Acalt" did not offer programs. "Xochitl Acalt" participants were

randomly identified and selected from a list of all women who had participated in the organization's workshops ( $N = 626$ ).

To construct a comparison sample, surveys were conducted with women from five neighboring communities that were demographically similar, but where "Xochilt Acalt" did not offer programs. Women residing in communities where "Xochilt Acalt" offered programs, but who were not members of the organization, were not selected to be interviewed because it is possible that merely living in communities where the organization had been involved could have exposed women to the values, resources, and mission of organization. In order to identify women to be interviewed in the five comparison communities, systematic sampling procedures for remote rural areas were employed with the assistance of community leaders (see Dutt, 2017 for further description of this process).

## **Measures**

### ***Demographic information***

Sociodemographic items included questions about women's age, number of children, education level, occupation, earnings, employment status, relationship status and duration of their relationship.

### ***Civic engagement intervention***

Participants were asked whether or not they had participated in the civic engagement intervention offered by "Xochilt Acalt". Women were also asked when their initial participation in the intervention began and how frequently they participated. Engagement in the intervention was coded as "1" if the woman had ever been involved in the program and "0" if she had not.

### ***Process variables***

#### ***Gender ideology***

Eight items selected from the 25-item short version of the Attitudes Towards Women scale (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973) were used to measure gender ideology that were selected based on cultural relevance and had previously been used in research with this population (Grabe, 2010). Mean scores were calculated, and lower scores reflect more subordinate views of women (i.e. more conservative gender ideology). Sample items included whether women agreed or disagreed with items such as "men should share in household tasks such as washing dishes and doing the laundry." Scores ranged from 0 to 1. Internal consistency for this scale was 0.58.

### Agency

The autonomy subscales from Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-being: Autonomy and Mastery (Ryff, 1989) were used to assess agency. Sample items included whether women agreed or disagreed with items such as "I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are contrary to the general consensus" and "I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what other people think is important." Mean scores were calculated, and higher scores reflected having greater agency. Scores ranged from 0 to 1 and internal consistency for this scale was 0.53.

### *Political efficacy*

The nine-item Policy Control subscale of Zimmerman and Zahniser's (1991) Sociopolitical Control Scale was used to measure women's perception of their abilities to effectively influence political decisions in their communities. Sample items included whether women agreed or disagreed with items such as: "People like me are generally well qualified to participate in the political activity and decision making in our country." Mean scores were calculated, and higher scores reflected higher levels of political efficacy. Scores ranged from 0 to 1 and internal consistency for this scale was 0.77.

### *Citizen participation*

#### *Civic engagement*

Engagement in community politics was measured using seven items developed in consultation with the collaborating organization. These include asking women whether or not they had participated in the following activities: attending community meetings; spoken at community meetings; spoken about women's rights at community meetings; influenced decisions that affect the community; participated in campaigns and advocacy about women's rights; advocated for women's rights when talking to other people in their community and voted in national elections to support women's rights. Summed scores were calculated, and higher scores reflect greater engagement. Scores ranged from 0 to 7.

### *Community leadership*

Nine questions were used to assess whether women held positions of leadership in their communities that were directed towards supporting other women. A list of possible leadership positions women could hold was generated in collaboration with leaders of "Xochilt Acalt." These positions included: promoter of gender rights, a representative on a community

council, health promoter, environmental promoter, representative in the consensus building spaces or community defender. Women who responded that they held any of these positions, even if they held multiple, were coded as holding a leadership position (1) and women who did not hold any of these positions were coded as not holding a leadership position (0).

### **Procedure**

Prior to data collection, a concerted effort was extended to verify the accuracy and adequacy of the survey's translation. Each item was translated into Spanish, evaluated in partnership with the local research team, and then back translated to ensure the meanings were conveyed properly. After completing this process, the survey was piloted with women living in Malpaisillo and additional modifications (described below) were made to ensure the meaning of questions were properly conveyed and understood in this specific location.

Five women were trained to administer the surveys. Each of the interviewers was local to Nicaragua, but residents of the capital city, Managua, which is located approximately 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Malpaisillo. The geographic distance in residence between the interviewer and interviewee supported a sense of anonymity for the interviewee, decreasing the likelihood of social desirability bias within responses, while simultaneously facilitating comfortable communication in Spanish with another woman native to Nicaragua.

To administer the survey, the interviewers arrived at women's homes and explained that they were surveying women about life in Malpaisillo-Larreynaga and would be asking women questions about their opinions, interests, relationships, and activities. Once women agreed to participate, the interviewers read the informed consent which explained that all their responses would be kept confidential, that their names would not be attached to their responses on the surveys and that only an aggregate of women's responses would be shared. Surveys were conducted in private spaces in the interviewees' homes and lasted between 35 and 60 min. Consistent with previous research conducted in remote areas where literacy rates are low, including research conducted in this region, items involving Likert responses were converted to a dichotomous response, as indicated above (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; Grabe, 2010).

## **Results**

### **Participant demographics**

Demographic statistics broken down by participation in the civic engagement intervention are presented in [Table 1](#). The average age of the

**Table 1.** Demographics.

	Civic engagement intervention participant ( <i>n</i> = 112)	Non-participant ( <i>n</i> = 149)	<i>p</i> Value
Age (Mean ( <i>M</i> ), <i>SD</i> )	40.13 (14.06)	39.97 (13.37)	n.s.
Relationship status (% partnered)	75.5	77.9	n.s.
Age difference between woman and her partner ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	4.78 (6.23)	4.5 (8.41)	n.s.
Number of children ( <i>M</i> , <i>SD</i> )	3.16 (2.03)	3.5 (2.48)	n.s.
Education (% at levels)			n.s.
Completed primary	40.9	47.4	
Completed secondary	29.1	22.1	
Additional schooling (e.g. technical or university)	19.1	10.7	
Literacy (% literate)	92.7	85.2	.04
Employment (% employed outside the home)	32.3	27.6	n.s.

respondents was 40.03 ( $SD = 14$ ) and about three-quarters of the women were in partnered relationships. The majority of the sample had three or more children ( $M = 3.35$ ;  $SD = 2.29$ ). Most of the women had completed at least some formal schooling and were literate. Additionally, about one-third of the women interviewed had some type of employment outside of their home. The only identified differences between participants in the civic engagement intervention and nonparticipants were literacy, thus literacy levels were controlled in subsequent analyses.

### Group difference tests

A multivariate analysis of variance test was run to compare differences between civic engagement participants and non-participants across all the proposed process and outcome variables: gender ideology, agency, political efficacy, civic engagement, and community leadership. The omnibus test was significant,  $F(1, 239) = 4.38$   $p < .05$ . Results of univariate tests can be found in Table 2. Differences between participants and non-participants on all the variables were significant and in the expected direction. Women who were involved in the civic participation program reported more progressive gender ideology, higher levels of the agency, a greater sense of political efficacy and both a greater likelihood of civic engagement and holding a community leadership position. Moreover, the effect sizes were quite substantial and atypically high for psychological research, suggesting that involvement in the civic engagement program was linked to rather robust differences in women's experiences.

**Table 2.** Group differences on proposed process and outcome variables.<sup>a</sup>

	Civic engagement intervention participant <i>n</i> = 112, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Non-participant <i>n</i> = 149, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>p</i> Value	<i>d</i>
Process variables				
Gender ideology	0.88 (0.17)	.72 (.20)	<.00	0.86
Agency	0.81 (0.16)	.73 (.16)	<.00	0.50
Political efficacy	0.57 (0.24)	.47 (.23)	<.00	0.42
Civic engagement	5.95 (1.74)	3.40 (2.28)	<.00	1.26
Community leadership	0.27 (0.44)	.04 (.20)	<.00	0.67

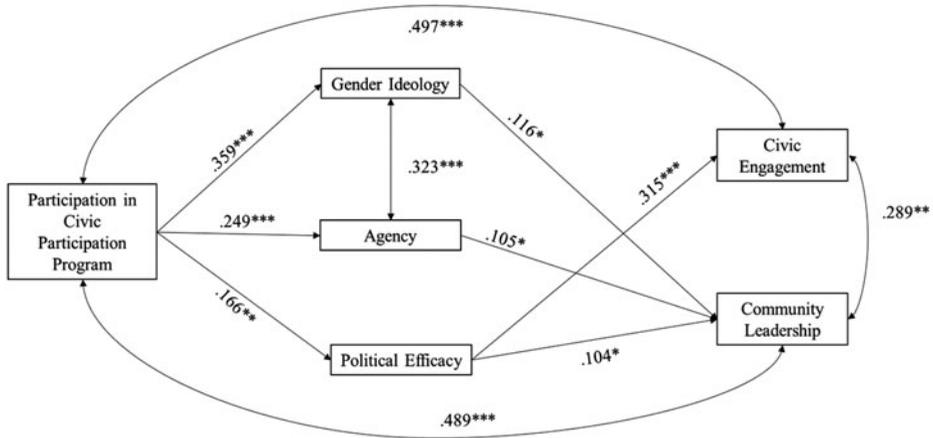
<sup>a</sup>Mean differences are indicated along with the *d* = effect size. Effect sizes are calculated as the difference between two means divided by the standardized deviation ( $d = [(M_1 - M_2)/s]$ ). Effect sizes are computed to assess the magnitude of the difference between groups. According to Cohen (1988), an effect size of 0.2 might be considered “small” (although still a notable difference), whereas values around 0.5 are “medium” effects and values of 0.8 or higher considered “large” effects.

### Testing a process model

In addition to our interest in identifying outcomes that would be associated with involvement in the civic engagement program, we were also interested in understanding the psychosocial processes that linked involvement in the civic engagement program and women’s political participation. We hypothesized that involvement in the civic engagement program would be linked to more progressive gender ideology, higher levels of agency and a greater sense of sociopolitical efficacy. These variables, in turn, would be linked to civic engagement and holding leadership positions in the community.

The hypothesized model tested did not provide an adequate fit to the data (i.e.  $\chi^2 = 69.71$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .00$ , NFI = 0.68, CFI = 0.69 and RMSEA = 0.19). Specifically, neither gender ideology nor agency predicted civic engagement and political efficacy was not correlated with agency or gender ideology. Consequently, a new model was constructed that accounted for the non-significant pathways. Results of the new path model provided adequate fit to the data (i.e.  $\chi^2 = 4.01$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .404$ , NFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.99 and RMSEA = 0.004; Figure 1). In this model, participation in the intervention was linked to civic engagement and leadership positions due, in part, to all three hypothesized process variables. These findings are further described below, and include bootstrapping analyses with 5000 resamples, as recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008), to identify mediating and indirect effects.

First, women’s participation in the community intervention was directly related to reporting more progressive gender ideology, higher levels of agency and higher levels of political efficacy. In addition, gender ideology, agency, and political efficacy all predicted holding a community leadership position, and political efficacy also predicted higher levels of civic engagement. Furthermore, findings from bootstrapping analyses indicate that gender ideology, agency and political efficacy all partially mediated the



**Figure 1.** Model demonstrating significant pathways linking participation in “Xochilt Acalt” to citizen participation outcome variables. Values are standardized beta weights. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$  and \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

relation between the intervention and holding a community leadership position (gender ideology:  $B = 0.39$ ; 95%  $CI = [0.08-1.05]$ ; agency:  $B = 0.17$ ; 95%  $CI = [0.007-0.49]$  and political efficacy:  $B = 0.08$ ; 95%  $CI = [0.06-0.30]$ ). Political efficacy partially mediated the positive relation between the intervention and civic engagement ( $B = 0.31$  and 95%  $CI = [0.12-0.59]$ ). These findings suggest that participation in the intervention relates to women’s involvement in activities and positions that have the potential to affect change in their communities, in part because they are gaining knowledge, confidence, and competencies supporting their capacity for citizen participation.

**Discussion**

The pursuit of social equity in areas related to gendered justice calls not only for greater representation of women in political positions but also for their meaningful participation in decision-making and leadership (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). The current study demonstrates that taking a liberation psychology approach to the investigation of women’s political participation uncovers mechanisms related to community intervention and individual psychosocial processes that enable women’s citizen participation and may hold the potential for viable routes to gender justice. The finding that community intervention disrupts traditional notions of gender ideology, enhances individual agency and political efficacy, thereby relating to citizen participation provides support for the suggestion that considering larger social structures and psychosocial processes involved in institutional gender inequity is critical to facilitating transformative levels of political participation and decision-making among women. This both contributes to future

directions in the field and also to possibilities for cutting edge social action and change.

First, the psychosocial processes demonstrated in the current study contribute to a growing body of literature that helps us better conceptualize women's empowerment. Demonstrating that shifting the awareness of the ways in which ideology helps uphold inequity is related to women's agency and efficacy provides support for the suggestion that multiple components and levels of empowerment relate to each other and are critical to understanding outcomes related to meaningful citizen participation. Although identifying structural patterns of inequity has long been the task of political and social theorists (e.g. Bartky, 1990), the findings suggest that the root causes of inequity stem from the ideologies that underlie inequitable social conditions. Although community interventions may catalyze the transformation of ideologies, the development of women's citizen participation may be best understood as a process that highlights the relation between intervention, ideology, and individual psychosocial processes.

The importance of understanding the processes of empowerment is not just academic. The findings demonstrated in the current study suggest that there are concrete ways to bring women into the political process. The aim of the community-based intervention was not to enhance individual women's experience of wellness; rather it was to increase women's participation in communities in a manner that had widespread impact. Therefore, beyond looking at whether women experienced individual empowerment, we were interested in examining the extent to which the intervention led to meaningful participation. We found that participation in the community intervention was related not only to citizen participation outcomes but also to more progressive gender ideology, increased agency and higher levels of political efficacy. Although the direction of these relationships cannot be discerned from the model, the links lend support to Freire's (1972) theory of consciousness raising through group forums as a means to bring about empowerment. Moreover, prior research suggests that even when self-selection processes may be at play (e.g. students who enroll in Women's or Ethnic studies classes), that identity development and consciousness unfold through variously more progressive stages due to organized participation (Bargad & Hyde, 1991). We suggest that community-based organizations are positioned to systematically address injustice and inequity through local interventions, at the same time that they remain flexible and adaptable in diverse community contexts.

This study also demonstrated that successful collaborations between community-based organizations and activist scholars may be a critical factor in the struggle for social justice. The outcomes of this research reflect a synergistic relationship between a women's organization and social

psychologists whereby the group of organized women developed their own strategies for change and the psychologists, in the words of Martín-Baró (1994), used the discipline in the service of social justice by focusing on the oppressive reality of societal inequity. In the current investigation, the authors did not introduce an intervention or participatory action, rather we worked with community members who were stakeholders interested in empirical support for a community-based intervention that demonstrated processes of change.

It is also important to consider the methodological limitations of the current study when interpreting the results and making suggestions for future research. Based on the demonstrated model, it is not possible to account for women's initial interest in joining the organization. The variables in the demonstrated model were examined in the hypothesized order for three primary reasons: (a) the theoretical framework used to develop the manuscript emphasizes the role of community-based intervention in enhancing the capacity for individuals working toward more equitable realities; (b) previously published papers by the authors have examined alternate path models that suggest the organizational or structural levels of empowerment precede individual levels and (c) the data presented in the model is accompanied by qualitative findings (though not presented in this paper) from interviews with leaders at the organization and women in the communities that lend further support to the mechanisms at play. Regardless, future research should include longitudinal studies to investigate the causal effects of change. Sound methodology surrounding the investigation of women's political participation is imperative to understanding the obstacles that women confront and effecting interventions that can contribute to social change in a globalized context.

## Note

1. In a review of community psychology literature, Angeliq and Culley (2000) reported a notable lack of feminist analyses and scholarship related to women's concerns. Of 2,178 articles published between 1973 and 1997 in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* and the *Journal of Community Psychology* that the authors reviewed, only 9.8% were considered women relevant and only 3% were considered feminist. Mental health and motherhood were the most addressed women relevant topics. A review of the literature since that time has not produced much greater breadth, although the topic of violence against women has received increased attention (e.g. Frye, 2007).

## Acknowledgments

Our sincere gratitude goes to several people who have made this research possible including Carlos Arenas, Suyen Barahona, the research team at CINASE and members of the Xochilt Acalt Coordinating Counsel.

## Funding

This research was made possible by financial assistance from the Ruth Landes Memorial Research Fund, a program of The Reed Foundation.

## References

- Andrews, M. (2006). Breaking down barriers: Feminism, politics and psychology. *Feminism and Psychology, 16*(1), 13–17.
- Angelique, H. L., & Culley, M. R. (2000). Searching for feminism: An analysis of community psychology literature relevant to women's concerns. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 28*(6), 793–813. doi:[10.1023/A:1005111800169](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005111800169)
- Bandura, A. (2006). Going global with social cognitive theory: From prospect to paydirt. In S. I. Donaldson, D. E. Berger, & K. Pezdek (Eds.), *Applied psychology: New frontiers and rewarding careers* (pp. 53–79). Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bargad, A., & Hyde, J. S. (1991). Women's studies: A study of feminist identity development in women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 15*(2), 181–201. doi:[10.1111/j.1471-6402.1991.tb00791.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1991.tb00791.x)
- Bartky, S. L. (1990). Toward a phenomenology of feminist consciousness. In *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression* (pp. 11–21). London, UK: Psychology Press.
- Beaumont, E. (2011). Promoting political agency, addressing political inequality: A multi-level model of internal political efficacy. *The Journal of Politics, 73*(1), 216–231. doi:[10.1017/S0022381610000976](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381610000976)
- Bond, M. A., & Mulvey, A. (2000). A history of women and feminist perspectives in community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 28*(5), 599–630.
- Brodsky, A. E. (2009). Multiple psychological senses of community in Afghan context: Exploring commitment and sacrifice in an underground resistance community. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 44*(3–4), 176–187.
- Brodsky, A. E., Portnoy, G. A., Scheibler, J. E., Welsh, E. A., Talwar, G., & Carrillo, A. (2012). Beyond (the ABCs): Education, community, and feminism in Afghanistan. *Journal of Community Psychology, 40*(1), 159–181.
- Case, A. D., & Hunter, C. D. (2012). Counterspaces: A unit of analysis for understanding the role of settings in marginalized individuals' adaptive responses to oppression. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 50*(1–2), 257–270. doi:[10.1007/s10464-012-9497-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9497-7).
- Cattaneo, L. B., & Chapman, A. R. (2010). The process of empowerment: A model for use in research and practice. *The American Psychologist, 65*(7), 646–659.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Cole, E. R., & Stewart, A. J. (1996). Meanings of political participation among black and white women: political identity and social responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71*(1), 130.
- Cornwall, A., & Coelho, V. S. (2007). *Spaces for change? The politics of citizen participation in new democratic arenas*. (Vol. 4). London: Zed Books.
- Cornwall, A., & Goetz, A. M. (2005). Democratizing democracy: Feminist perspectives. *Democratization, 12*(5), 783–800.

- Dutt, A. (2017). Civic participation, prefigurative politics, and feminist solidarity in rural Nicaragua. In S. Grabe (Ed.), *Women's human rights: A social psychological perspective on resistance, liberation, and justice* (pp. 151–177). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dutt, A., & Grabe, S. (2014). Activism, marginality and psychology: Narratives of three women committed to social change. *Qualitative Psychology, 1*(2), 107–122. doi:10.1037/qup0000010.
- Dutt, A., & Grabe, S. (2017). Gender ideology and social transformation: Using mixed methods to explore processes of ideological change and the promotion of women's human rights in Tanzania. *Sex Roles, 77*(5–6), 309–324.
- Ellsberg, M., & Heise, L. (2005). *Researching violence against women: A practical guide or researchers and activists*. Washington, DC: World Health Organization.
- Emig, A. G., Hesse, M. B., & Fisher, S. H. (1996). Black-white differences in political efficacy, trust, and sociopolitical participation: A critique of the empowerment hypothesis. *Urban Affairs Review, 32*(2), 264–276. doi:10.1177/107808749603200206
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos*. New York: Continuum.
- Frye, V. (2007). The informal social control of intimate partner violence against women: Exploring personal attitudes and perceived neighborhood social cohesion. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*(8), 1001–1018. doi:10.1002/jcop.20209
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. (1999). Gender, power dynamics, and social interaction. In M. M. Ferree, & J. Lorber (Eds.), *Revisioning gender* (pp. 365–398). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Grabe, S. (2010). Promoting gender equality: The role of ideology, power, and control in the link between land ownership and violence in Nicaragua. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 10*(1), 146–170.
- Grabe, S. (2012). An empirical examination of women's empowerment and transformative change in the context of international development. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 49*(1–2), 233–245.
- Grabe, S. (2015). Participation: Structural and relational power and Maasai women's political subjectivity in Tanzania. *Feminism and Psychology, 25*(4), 528–548.
- Grabe, S. (2016). *Narrating a psychology of resistance: Voices from the compañeras in Nicaragua*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Grabe, S. (2017). *Women's human rights: A social psychological perspective on resistance, liberation, and justice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Grabe, S., Dutt, A., & Dworkin, S. L. (2014). Women's community mobilization and well-being: Local resistance to gendered social inequities in Nicaragua and Tanzania. *Journal of Community Psychology, 42*(4), 379–397.
- Hodgson, D. L. (2011). *Gender and culture at the limit of rights*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change, 30*(3), 435–464. doi:10.1111/1467-7660.00125.
- Kampwirth, K. (1996). Confronting adversity with experience: The emergence of feminism in Nicaragua. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society, 3*(2–3), 136.
- Lykes, M. B., Beristain, C. M., & Pérez-Armiñan, M. L. C. (2007). Political violence, impunity, and emotional climate in Maya communities. *Journal of Social Issues, 63*(2), 369–385.
- Lykes, M. B., & Moane, G. (2009). Editors' introduction: Whither feminist liberation psychology? Critical explorations of feminist and liberation psychologies for a globalizing world. *Feminism and Psychology, 19*(3), 283.
- Martín-Baró, I. (1994). *Writings for a liberation psychology*. (edited by A. Aron & S. Corne). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Maton, K. I. (2008). Empowering community settings: Agents of individual development, community betterment, and positive social change. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 41*(1–2), 4–21. doi:[10.1007/s10464-007-9148-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-007-9148-6)
- Maton, K. I., & Salem, D. A. (1995). Organizational characteristics of empowering community settings: A multiple case study approach. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*(5), 631–656. doi:[10.1007/BF02506985](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506985)
- Moane, G. (2003). Bridging the personal and the political: Practices for a liberation psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 31*(1–2), 91–101.
- Mohanty, R. (2007). Gendered subjects, the state and participatory spaces: The politics of domesticating participation in rural India. In A. Cornwall, & V. S. P. Coelho (Eds.), *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*. London: Zed Press.
- Molyneux, M. (1985). Mobilization without emancipation? Women's interests, the state, and revolution in Nicaragua. *Feminist Studies, 11*(2), 227–254.
- Montero, M. (2007). The political psychology of liberation: From politics to ethics and back. *Political Psychology, 28*(5), 517–533.
- Montero, M. (2009). Community action and research as citizenship construction. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 43*(1–2), 149–161.
- Pateman, C. (2012). Participatory democracy revisited. *Perspectives on Politics, 10*(1), 7–19. doi:[10.1017/S1537592711004877](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711004877)
- Perkins, D. D. (1995). Speaking truth to power: Empowerment ideology as social intervention and policy. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*(5), 765–794. doi:[10.1007/BF02506991](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506991)
- Perkins, D. D., & Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Empowerment theory, research, and application. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*(5), 569–579. doi:[10.1007/BF02506982](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506982)
- Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2008). Assessing mediation in communication research. In *The Sage sourcebook of advanced data analysis methods for communication research* (pp. 13–54). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Prilleltensky, I. (2008). The role of power in wellness, oppression, and liberation: The promise of psychopolitical validity. *Journal of Community Psychology, 36*(2), 116–136. doi:[10.1002/jcop.20225](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20225)
- Quimby, C. C., & Angelique, H. (2011). Identifying barriers and catalysts to fostering pro-environmental behavior: Opportunities and challenges for community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 47*(3–4), 388–396. doi:[10.1007/s10464-010-9389-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9389-7)
- Rappaport, J. (1987). Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: Toward a theory for community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 15*(2), 121–148. doi:[10.1007/BF00919275](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00919275)
- Riger, S. (1993). What's wrong with empowerment? *American Journal of Community Psychology, 21*(3), 279–292. doi:[10.1007/BF00941504](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00941504)
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 57*(6), 1069–1081. doi:[10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069)
- Sánchez, L. G., & Martín-Sevillano, A. B. (2006). Feminism and identity in political psychology. *Feminism and Psychology, 16*(1), 65–72.
- Speer, P. W., Peterson, N. A., Armstead, T. L., & Allen, C. T. (2013). The influence of participation, gender and organizational sense of community on psychological empowerment: The moderating effects of income. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 51*(1–2), 103–113.

- Spence, J. T., Helmreich, R., & Stapp, J. (1973). A short version of the attitudes towards women scale (AWS). *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 2(4), 219–220. doi:10.3758/BF03329252
- Tripp, A. M. (2003). *The changing face of Africa's legislatures: Women and quotas*. A paper presented at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IIDEA), Pretoria, South Africa.
- White, S. C. (1996). Depoliticising development: The uses and abuses of participation. *Development in Practice*, 6(1), 6–15.
- World Bank. (2017). *Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)*. Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>.
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 581–599. doi:10.1007/BF02506983
- Zimmerman, M. A., & Rappaport, J. (1988). Citizen participation, perceived control, and psychological empowerment. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 16(5), 725–750.
- Zimmerman, M. A., & Zahniser, J. H. (1991). Refinements of sphere-specific measures of perceived control: Development of a sociopolitical control scale. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 19(2), 189–204.