

# Study shows domestic violence falls as women gain rights from land ownership

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A member of Centro de Mujeres Xochitl Acalt in Nicaragua giving a tour of her farm. Credit: Shelly Grabe

The change was clear and it was dramatic: "I went from being property to owning property," a woman in a remote area of Nicaragua told UC Santa Cruz assistant professor of psychology Shelly Grabe.

Grabe wanted to know how the power dynamic between men and [women](#) might change when women owned land. More importantly, she wanted to know how the propensity for gender-based violence against women might change.

Writing in the journal *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Grabe suggests that when women in developing countries own land, they gain power within their relationships and are less likely to experience violence.

Grabe and co-authors Rose Grace Grose and Anjali Dutt, both UCSC psychology graduate students, analyzed data Grabe collected from 492 women in Nicaragua and Tanzania in 2007 and 2009 respectively.

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

Violence against women is not a matter of isolated cases but rather the result of systems of power, and it can change when the power relationship changes, Grabe found.

## **Not just 'bad apples'**

"When we think about violence against women we often focus on isolated cases," Grabe said. "If we keep assuming the problem is a matter of a 'few bad apples' or 'fundamentalists' that we need to bring to justice we will never eradicate the problem."



A member of the Maasai Women's Development Organization in Tanzania readying her donkey to gather water. Credit: Shelly Grabe

"The findings suggest that if we shift the structures (thereby shifting views of women) it will also shift domestic relations which dramatically improve women's risk," she said.

Physical and psychological violence against women is a result of structural, gender-based inequalities such as the lack of access to resources, equal pay, and representation in politics, she said. "These inequalities grant men disproportionate power over women and as a result we see male control and dominance being exerted over women's bodies in the form of violence."

## **Impact of globalization**

Other researchers have found that globalization is making the problem worse. In many regions of the developing world—what has been called the "Global South"—land is held in traditional ways, often communally or by male-dominated families. The term Global South is used, not as a

geographical reference, but instead to reflect the socioeconomic and political divide between wealthy countries, known collectively as the North, and poorer countries often exploited in processes of globalization.

Financial models in the "North" such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank frequently require private land ownership as a prerequisite for economic aid.

"One of the consequences of the shift to privatized systems," researchers say, "is an erosion of the few rights to land that women previously held under customary or cooperative systems."

Grabe worked with grassroots organizations in both Nicaragua and Tanzania for her study. Though the situations were different, she found women in newly privatized areas are using land as a proxy of power.

"Property grants them rights" and the women are very strategic about it, she said. "They knew that if they had land they'd change the [power](#) dynamic. They were very clear about the social inequity."

## Who has the rights?

Previously, women would in effect grant rights to men. "Women would say, 'he has the rights, he owns the land, he owns the cattle,'" Grabe said. Those rights included a right to exert violence. Once a woman becomes a property owner she gains rights.

Grabe found that grassroots women's organizations are making a concerted effort to tackle the problem of [violence against women](#) by going to the root of the problem—structural inequality instead of intervening in individual cases with women who are targeted.

"In order to address rates of [violence](#) against women we need to address the structure of inequities," she said.

Grabe joined UCSC in 2008. She is also affiliated with the departments of feminist studies and Latin American and Latino studies. For spring quarter, she's teaching a senior seminar in psychology and social activism.

The article is "Women's Land Ownership and Relationship Power: A Mixed Methods Approach to Understanding Structural Inequities and Violence Against Women" online in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*.

**More information:** Shelly Grabe, Rose Grace Grose, and Anjali Dutt. "Women's Land Ownership and Relationship Power: A Mixed Methods Approach to Understanding Structural Inequities and Violence Against Women." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 0361684314533485, first published on May 6, 2014 [DOI: 10.1177/0361684314533485](https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684314533485)

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