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## Perceived Impact of a Land and Property Rights Program on Violence Against Women in Rural Kenya: A Qualitative Investigation

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### Abstract

The current study focuses on a community-led land and property rights program in two rural provinces in western Kenya. The program was designed to respond to women's property rights violations to reduce violence against women and HIV risks at the community level. Through in-depth interviews with 30 women, we examine the perceived impact that this community-level property rights program had on violence against women at the individual and community level. We also examine perceptions as to how reductions in violence were achieved. Finally, we consider how our findings may aid researchers in the design of structural violence-prevention strategies.

### Keywords

structural interventions; violence against women; land and property rights; gender inequality; Kenya

### Introduction and Overview

Gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS are synergistic global health pandemics, each exacerbating the impact of the other (Dunkle et al., 2004; Dunkle et al., 2006; Dworkin, Dunbar, Krishnan, Hatcher, & Sawires, 2011; Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, & Shai, 2010;

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### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Jewkes, Levin, & Penn-Kekana, 2003; Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell, & Dunkle, 2009; UNAIDS, 2010; WHO, 2009). Women who are HIV-positive are significantly more likely to have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetimes than women who are not HIV-positive (Dunkle et al., 2004; Kishor, 2012; Maman et al., 2002; van der Straten et al., 1998). Men who have perpetrated intimate partner physical violence are substantially more likely to have HIV (Jewkes et al., 2009). Inequalities in the distribution of power and resources between women and men, economic dependencies, and differences in decision-making dominance and relationship control undergird both women's violence and HIV risk globally (Kim & Watts, 2005; Pronyk et al., 2006; Pulerwitz, Amaro, De Jong, Gortmaker, & Rudd, 2002; Pulerwitz, Gortmaker, & DeJong, 2000).

To respond to these synergistic pandemics, science-based interventions in both the violence and HIV prevention realms have tended to emphasize individual-, couple-, and small group-level programming such as battered women's shelters, clinic-based violence screening, and counseling and family-focused interventions (El-Bassel, Witte, Wada, Gilbert, & Wallace, 2004; Garcia-Moreno, 2002; Krishnan, Subbiah, Khanum, Chandra, & Padian, 2012). In the past 5 years, in both the violence and HIV prevention fields, calls have been made within the scientific community to supplement individual, interpersonal, and/or small group interventions with those that intervene at the structural and community levels (Auerbach, 2009; G. R. Gupta, Parkhurst, Ogden, Aggleton, & Mahal, 2008; Jewkes et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2007; WHO, 2011).

Structural-level interventions include economic empowerment programs that have shown some success in reducing violence against women (Kim et al., 2009; Pronyk et al., 2006; Pronyk et al., 2008), and property rights programming that has been found to improve women's relationship power and reduce violence against women (Grabe, 2010, 2012; Lu et al., 2013). Despite strong recognition that violence against women is partly driven by structural-level inequalities between women and men (Connell, 1987; Hampton, Oliver, & Magarian, 2003; Kaufman, Shefer, Crawford, Simbayi, & Kalichman, 2008; Krishnan, 2005; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005; WHO, 2011) and numerous calls within the science base to move in the direction of structural interventions (Adimora & Auerbach, 2010; Auerbach, Parkhurst, & Cáceres, 2011; Blankenship, Friedman, Dworkin, & Mantell, 2006; Kim et al., 2007, 2009; Parker, Easton, & Klein, 2000; Sumartojo, Doll, Holtgrave, Gayle, & Merson, 2000), very few structural-level programs exist. Even fewer have been empirically examined for their health effects, particularly in violence prevention (Jewkes et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2009). A fertile area for scientific research is therefore collaborations between academic and community-based organizations (CBOs) that highlight innovative structural-level programs that intervene on inequitable gender relations and women's experiences of violence (Dworkin et al., 2013; Grabe, 2012; International Center for Research on Women [ICRW], 2004; Lu et al., 2013).

### **The Promises and Limitations of Current Structural-Level Approaches to Prevent and Reduce Violence Against Women**

Structural- and community-level approaches are innovative within the scientific literature because they shift from a common individual-level focus on violence to macro-level

analyses and solutions that may be more far reaching than aiming to effect one individual or couple at a time. For example, the Intervention With Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity (IMAGE) in rural Limpopo South Africa combined economic empowerment, HIV/AIDS education, and content on gender equality. At 2-year follow-up, participants in the intervention arm of this randomized controlled trial experienced a 55% reduction in intimate partner violence relative to controls (Pronyk et al., 2006). To understand how the program content may have operated to reduce violence against women, Kim et al. (2009) assessed mediators of program impacts and found improvements across several measures of empowerment including self-confidence, autonomy in decision-making, and larger social networks.

Despite the impressive promise of economic empowerment programs, limitations within programs that rely on microfinance or microenterprise to empower women economically have been identified. First, there is a tendency for programs to rely on increased income to an individual or small group as a route through which to reduce violence against women. Some argue that because loans are delivered to individuals and/or small groups, this kind of small-scale operation may not in fact be a “structural” intervention that makes changes on a broader level (Karim, 2011). More importantly, research shows that microfinance programs provide a very small amount of increased income (if any) to women, and hence, such increases are likely not large enough to restructure gendered power relations at the relationship or household level (Dworkin & Blankenship, 2009; Jurik, 2005; Mayoux, 1998). Second, empirical investigations have shown repeatedly that women often do not have control over the additional household income derived from such programs and, therefore, it is questionable whether income generation fundamentally alters gendered power relations and/or violence in the long run (Dupas & Robinson, 2009; Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Karim, 2011). Third, some scholars have reported that domestic violence against women can increase in microenterprise programming (Karim, 2011; Rahman, 1999). Fourth, given that many women in Eastern and Southern Africa experience vulnerabilities to land loss, and given that property rights violations may lead to women losing their source of livelihood (e.g., land), it may be necessary to combine income generation programs with programming that prevents and responds to property rights violations (Weinhardt et al., 2009). Given the limitations of microfinance programming, expanding women’s access to and control over land, a harder asset, may be one way to better address power relations between women and men and reshape the risk of violence in the process (Agarwal, 1994; Dworkin, Sutherland, Gambou, Moalla, & Kapoor, 2009; ICRW, 2007b).

An innovative body of work has demonstrated a relationship between land ownership and women’s receipt of physical and sexual violence in West Bengal, Nepal, Nicaragua, and South Africa (Grabe, 2010, 2012; ICRW, 2007b; Izumi, 2007; Panda & Agarwal, 2005). A quasi-experimental study conducted in Nicaragua provided empirical evidence that land ownership by women decreased their experiences of violence within the previous 12 months (Grabe, 2010). Female landowning participants in the Nicaraguan study challenged traditional gender-role ideologies, had higher levels of relationship power, and experienced less partner control, all of which were detailed as the mechanisms through which land ownership led to reductions in violence (Grabe, 2010, 2012).

The ICRW (2007b) conducted a cross-sectional study in South Africa and Uganda to investigate the protective effects of property on women's risk of violence and HIV/ AIDS. Study participants reported that secure property access and/or ownership provided them with economic independence, which was protective against intimate partner violence and allowed women to better navigate gendered power relations. Women who maintained independent access to land had the ability to leave violent situations and return to their own land. Thus, one key mechanism through which property may work to reduce violence against women is through economic empowerment.

Although the precise mechanisms through which land ownership may work to reduce violence against women are not thoroughly examined in the literature, the above studies do point to the ways that land and property may provide a structural context through which gendered power is restructured and may influence violence outcomes. Because land and property rights ensure basic human rights to shelter and livelihood and have been recognized as a source of wealth, social status, and power (Dworkin et al., 2009; Grabe 2010, 2012; J. Gupta, 2006), these findings may not be surprising. In addition, some research shows that land can serve to empower women by influencing bargaining power at the individual and community levels, providing expanded social status in households and communities, and increasing levels of individual agency (Dworkin et al., 2009; Grabe, 2010, 2012; ICRW, 2004, 2005). For these reasons, land and property may have the potential to minimize gender inequality and influence a variety of health outcomes, including violence against women (Grabe, 2010, 2012; ICRW, 2005, 2007b).

However, because customary norms and practices throughout most of the world recognize men as the head of household and the principle owner of land assets, women are vulnerable to a loss of land, particularly when husbands die of HIV in high seroprevalence settings where women are largely blamed for bringing the disease into the household (Deere & León, 2001; Dworkin et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2013; Palmer, 2008; Pena, Maiques, & Castillo, 2008; Turan et al., 2012). Although there are numerous United Nations (UN) instruments that specifically protect women's right to inherit and own property on an equal basis, this right is frequently violated (FIDA, 2009; Izumi, 2007; Scholtz & Gomez, 2004; Yngstrom, 2002). The exclusion of women from owning or controlling property is quite common, and property rights violations are frequent in Eastern Africa, particularly in Kenya where the current study takes place (Aliber & Walker, 2006; Drimie, 2002; Izumi, 2007; Seeley, Grellier, & Barnett, 2004; U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], 2009; Walker, 2002).

Although very few studies have empirically examined the linkages between property rights and violence against women in the Kenyan context or elsewhere, recognition of the interdependence between property rights and violence has led a number of CBOs and NGOs to focus on the link between property rights violations and violence in their HIV/AIDS care programs (ICRW, 2004). The development of property rights programs to reduce violence and HIV risks has outpaced the scientific research examining their structure, content, and impacts. Program beneficiaries of property rights programs are in a unique position to characterize their experiences of violence during and after dispossession. They are also in a unique position to articulate whether their in-laws, co-wives, and other family members escalate or de-escalate violent behavior toward them when cases of physical, sexual, and

psychological violence are reported to community-led mechanisms. Such beneficiaries can also help to elucidate why and how community-led reporting mechanisms are perceived to increase or decrease violence against women at the individual and community levels.

The current project is part of a larger research study that examines the impact of a community-led property rights program on land ownership as well as violence and HIV outcomes. The research is a collaborative effort between the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), the Kenyan Medical Research Institute (KEMRI), and GROOTS-Kenya (described below). Through 30 in-depth interviews with women who had participated in GROOTS-Kenya's Community Land and Property Watch Dog Model (CWDG), we sought to understand whether women who reported property rights violations and violence during the disinheritance process to a community-led property rights program experienced a subsequent increase or decrease in their experiences of violence from in-laws, co-wives, male heads of household, and other family members. We also sought to understand whether this community-led reporting mechanism for property rights violations was perceived to lead to an increase or decrease in violence against women at the community level. Finally, we sought to understand the mechanisms through which this community-led property rights program may work to decrease (or increase) violence against women at the individual and community levels.

### **The Context and the Setting**

In Kenya, 7.4% of adults are infected with HIV and 45% of women are victims of physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes (Kenya AIDS Indicator Survey [KAIS], 2007; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). The current study focuses on two rural districts in Kenya, Kakamega and Kendu Bay (in Kakamega and Homa Bay Counties, respectively), where HIV prevalence is high (23.8–33%) and property rights violations are common (National AIDS and STI Control Program [NASCOP], 2008; National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development [NCAPD], 2005a, 2005b). HIV rates in the districts of Kakamega and Kendu Bay where this research took place are significantly higher than the national seroprevalence rate in Kenya, which is 7.4%. These districts have HIV rates that are not only higher than the national average, but also higher than the average (15%) rates found in the worst affected county (Homa Bay County; KAIS, 2007; UNAIDS, 2010). In addition, Kakamega and Homa Bay Counties have the highest rates of lifetime physical and sexual violence, when compared with other provinces (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

Research from Kenya shows that certain factors increase a woman's risk of violence (Djamba & Kimuna, 2008; Kimuna & Djamba, 2008; Lawoko, Dalal, Jiayou, & Jansson, 2007). Women experience higher rates of violence when they live in poorer households, are in a polygamous marriage, have a husband who drinks alcohol, are in unskilled jobs (Kimuna & Djamba, 2008), and have a Luhya, Kisii/Kuria, or Luo ethnicity (Djamba & Kimuna, 2008). Similar to other countries in the world, women in Kenya who are HIV-positive are substantially more likely to have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetimes than women who are not HIV-positive (Kishor, 2012; Maman et al., 2002). Findings from the 2008–2009 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey indicate that gendered power inequalities in the household are also associated with higher rates of intimate partner

violence. Women who report that their male partners display controlling behaviors (e.g., distrust with money) experience more violence. Conversely, women who participate in a greater number of household decisions experience less violence (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

Although statutory law dictates that women's inheritance of property cannot be obscured on the grounds of gender, customary law is the primary means of regulation practiced in rural areas and it frequently leads to decisions that favor men in land disputes (Doss, 2008; FIDA, 2009; ICRW, 2007a). Women in Kenya have only secondary or use rights to land, primarily gained through marriage and kinship relationships (Aliber & Walker, 2006; Doss, 2008; Dworkin et al., 2013; Henrysson & Joireman, 2009). Patriarchal practices, a dual legal system with gaps between its statutory and customary processes, and a lack of rights knowledge among the general populace further contribute to discrimination in ownership and inheritance (Aliber & Walker, 2006; Doss, 2008; FIDA, 2009; Henrysson & Joireman, 2009; Izumi, 2007; Scholtz & Gomez, 2004; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003). Researchers do underscore that families and communities use coercive and violent methods to drive women from their homes on the death of a husband from HIV or other causes, and research has shown that it is widows who are particularly vulnerable to property grabbing, disinheritance, and violence during the disinheritance process (Agot et al., 2010; Dworkin et al., 2013; FIDA, 2009; Izumi, 2006; Lu et al., 2013; Walsh, 2005). These studies report that victims of property grabbing experience physical, psychological, and sexual violence during the process of dispossession. In one study from Kenya, whereas 39% of women in the general population reported experiencing physical violence, the prevalence increases to 60% among women who were divorced, separated, or widowed (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

Because of the gap between statutory and customary law and the prohibitive costs of the courts (particularly for rural women in extreme poverty), scholars have underscored the urgency and importance of community-led models that seek to locally prevent and resolve property rights violations (Dworkin et al., 2013; ICRW, 2007a; Knox et al., 2007). GROOTS-Kenya, a CBO, has developed and implemented one such flagship program known as the "Community Land and Property Watch Dog Model" (CWDG).

### **GROOTS Kenya—Community Land and Property Watchdog Model**

GROOTS-Kenya is a network of CBOs and was founded in 1995 after the fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing to increase the involvement and visibility of grass-roots women in community development and governance. In response to the high HIV prevalence in Nyanza and Western Provinces, GROOTS-Kenya carried out home-based care giving within HIV-affected households to support the overall health of HIV-positive individuals and to help ensure their adherence to anti-retroviral medications (Dworkin et al., 2013). It was within this context that home-based caregivers noticed that a woman "would suddenly disappear" from her home following the AIDS-related death of her husband (Dworkin et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2013). On further investigation, home-based caregivers learned that women were blamed for the death of their husbands and were subsequently disinherited and evicted from the household by their in-laws (Dworkin et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2013).

In 2005, GROOTS-Kenya developed its flagship women and property program, in response to growing community concerns that women were being property stripped and disinherited in their communities, particularly in households affected by HIV/ AIDS. The GROOTS-Kenya property rights model is operationalized as CWDGs on the local level and is comprised of volunteer women and men, including community health workers, traditional leaders, trained paralegals, and government stakeholders. The CWDG monitors women's disinheritance locally; mediates land disputes; refers unresolved cases to formal adjudication mechanisms; and raises awareness of women's rights, including women's land tenure and property rights, violence against women, and HIV risks. GROOTS-Kenya has established CWDGs in more than 30 locations in central and western Kenya, and altogether have managed more than 200 cases of women's property rights violations (GROOTS, 2008).

## Method

The current work draws on in-depth interview data collected from 30 individuals who were participants/beneficiaries of this community-led land and property rights program. We recruited individuals who went to the CWDG to report property rights violations and received assistance concerning land disputes, property grabbing, and instances of disinheritance and eviction. The 30 women were randomly selected from a comprehensive list of those who had been beneficiaries of this program. To be included in the study, women had to have received assistance from this property rights model in the past 3–6 months. We attempted to sample approximately 30 individuals based on Morse's (1994) recommendation for sample size minimums in qualitative research that are needed to attain adequate saturation and redundancy of themes. Demographic information about the women in the sample is shown in Table 1.

To minimize bias, interviews were carried out by interviewers who were hired through human resources at KEMRI, all of whom were external to GROOTS-Kenya but who were familiar with the communities in which we worked. These interviewers were trained in qualitative research methods and ethical practices in research by the senior (last) author. The interview guide focused on what happened to women when their husbands passed away, the reasons for property rights violations, the perceived links between property loss and violence, the perceived violence-related impacts of the program, and why the program was viewed as increasing or decreasing violence at the individual and community levels. Interviews lasted between 1.25 and 2.25 hours and were conducted in the local languages. Following completion, interviews were first transcribed into the local language and then into English. For their participation, each interviewee received reimbursement for transportation, in accordance with the ethical guidelines provided for research studies within Kenya. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the KEMRI Ethics Review Committee, and the UCSF Institutional Review Board. Data collection took place between January and May 2011.

To begin the coding process, two researchers extracted excerpts of the transcribed interviews relating to all of the domains of interest mentioned above. To establish a codebook, six interviews were randomly selected and independently evaluated using an open coding process used during the initial phase of coding often deployed in qualitative research



(Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). From this initial process of broad category generation, an additional four randomly selected interviews were coded. After a second round of coding, coders met to ensure full refinement of primary and secondary categories referred to as focused, intensive, or axial coding (Berg, 2001; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Once the full range of categories was established, the remaining interviews were double-coded independently by the first and second authors. Following independent coding of these transcripts, decision trails were noted and documented, and the overall concordance rate across coding categories was calculated to be 90% across the interviews. As coding categories were straightforward, discrepancies were not common. In nearly all cases, discrepancies were simple miscodes and did not involve substantive discussions.

In the results that follow, we first examine whether violence against women during the disinheritance process (from in-laws, co-wives, and other family members) was perceived to increase or decrease at the individual level at the time that women reported their property rights violations to the CWDG and beyond. Next, we examine whether women perceived that the existence of the CWDG improved or exacerbated violence against women at the community level overall. We then explore the perceived mechanisms through which reductions in violence were achieved. In the "Conclusion" section of this article, we make recommendations for future research focused on the development of property as a structural mechanism to prevent violence against women at the individual and community levels.

## Results

### Impact of Reporting Property Rights Violations to the CWDG: Individual Level

Nearly all of the interviewees in our sample who experienced violence during disinheritance, asset stripping, or property grabbing processes reported that the violence ceased when they reported property rights violations to the CWDG. For example, many women in our sample described how

after I had gone to the Watch Dog Group, they [the in-laws] have never beaten me again. (Woman, age 43, Kendu Bay)

Another interviewee agreed,

In my case, the violence stopped. Yes mine stopped; we [the in-laws] fought over family issues but I reported this to the Watch Dog and the following day they came and we sat down; to mean that the ones that happen in the village . . . the Watch Dogs solved them immediately. (Woman, age 53, Kendu Bay)

Whether the violence was from in-laws, co-wives, other family members (such as co-wives' sons, stepsons, or wives of brothers-in-law), or male heads of household, women consistently reported that the violence ceased after reporting to the CWDG:

Whenever I used to go to my home, he would abuse me, but now when I go, he speaks nicely. Even my co-wife does not abuse me. She used to abuse me badly . . . now she has calmed down. If she is still talking badly about me, she does it away

from my ears . . . but just facing me and abusing me the way she used to . . . she stopped. (Woman, age 56, Kakamega)

Nearly all of the participants emphasized that the CWDG's assistance in resolving violence during the disinheritance process resulted in immediate cessation of violence. A few participants described how they stopped experiencing violence when their in-laws had become aware that she had reported their property rights dispute to the CWDG:

They saw that I had people who had started helping me . . . they saw that they are the ones who were going to get hurt, that is why there was one of my in-laws who was supposed to go to jail, then there was someone who told him that . . . that person was working there. He told them that because I was taken to a room for questioning and I told them what I had gone through. Then one person told my in-law that, "this girl . . . the way she is talking . . . you are going to get hurt or even that land . . . she can get it all and you can lose it. It is better if you people cooled down, and went and talked over it, get to a compromise and then divide it." This is when these issues cooled down. (Woman, age 45, Kakamega)

Many women also reported that in addition to a reduction in physical violence that occurred during the disinheritance process, there were also reductions in verbal abuse from in-laws, co-wives, and others that were experienced after women reported the problem to the CWDG. For example, one participant stated that

there were no more verbal abuses because I said that they were hurling abuses at me because they were trying to take my property so I hoped that when I get my things the verbal abuse and the maltreatment will stop. When they released my property to me, I have not heard of any other issues from them. (Woman, age 39, Kendu Bay)

Only one participant in our sample described an increase in violence after reporting property rights violations to the CWDG. However, this participant was not a widow. Thus, nearly all women in our sample reported that when they experienced violence during the disinheritance process and took cases of property rights violations to the CWDG, this effectively stopped the violence during and after disinheritance. The perceived impact was the same for both physical abuse and verbal abuse experienced during disinheritance. The immediate impact on violence during and after disinheritance appeared to be consistent for both property rights cases that were fully resolved and those that were not yet resolved. Next, we examined whether participants perceived that the existence of the CWDG increased or decreased sexual and domestic violence against women more generally within their communities.

### **Perceived Impact of CWDGs on Gender-Based Violence at the Community Level**

Nearly all participants perceived that violence decreased within their communities due to the presence of CWDGs. Echoing the perceptions of most participants, one interviewee expanded that CWDGs affected sexual assault, child abuse, and domestic violence:

These days in locations where the Watch Dog Model is, you find that the rape cases are being reported in time . . . and they even follow the case through . . . the Watch Dog team

even follows it. . . . Even the cases of child abuse . . . cases of child abuse, cases of violence within the home, it has reduced. (Woman, age 45, Kendu Bay)

Another participant agreed,

Violence against women has really changed. It has really changed because during the past . . . we used to hear about a number of cases of women's properties being taken by the relatives . . . cases of raping . . . there were a number of cases of violence and wife beating . . . but once the CWDG worked with the stakeholders . . . now I can say, the violence is dying out. (Woman, age 47, Kendu Bay)

None of the women in our sample perceived that sexual and domestic violence had increased as a result of the community Watch Dog Groups. Overall, then, we found that the presence of CWDGs in communities was perceived to decrease gender-based violence in the community. In the next section of this article, we sought to understand the reasons why women perceived that violence had decreased at the individual and community levels.

### **Rationales for Perceived Decreases in Gender-Based Violence at the Individual and Community Levels**

Participants offered four rationales as to why they perceived a reduction in gender-based violence at the individual and community levels: (a) improved community-level awareness of women's rights and violence against women through education in local barazas (community meetings), (b) improved community-level mechanisms for reporting violence, (c) comprehensive response to reported cases of violence, and (d) perpetrators fearing legal or other consequences for enacting violence against women.

**Improved community awareness through education about women's rights and gender-based violence**—One of the key elements of the Community Watch Dog model is that CWDG members effectively sought collaboration and support from the Provincial Administration, especially at the level of district officers, chiefs, and assistant chiefs. CWDG members secured the trust of these stakeholders by underscoring the multi-sectoral nature of property rights violations and the way in which this problem required a multi-sectoral response (e.g., development, HIV, land, women's rights, child abuse; Lu et al., 2013). As a result, chiefs regularly offered the CWDG a speaking platform twice a month in local barazas (community meetings) that were intended to educate the community and allow for discussion of local issues. The discussions sensitized community members on the topics of women's right to own and access property, the problems of disinheritance and property grabbing, sexual and domestic violence against women, HIV risks, and where women could go to receive assistance for all of these issues. Nearly all of the interviewees in our sample noted that CWDG members spoke about the illegality of violence and ways to prevent violence at these local community meetings called barazas:

I have seen that there are a lot of changes because initially people used to just abuse one another and hit each other. Right now, the CWDG speaks on barazas against people abusing others and I have seen that those cases have really gone down. It's

very rare for you to hear that someone was beaten in this community. (Woman, age 50, Kakamega)

Another woman agreed,

We say “this baraza is not just a baraza,” because we hear of a lot of complaints that women are being beaten so much. So we go and talk as a community because the community will turn up in large numbers. We tell the men how they are supposed to stay well with their wives. (Woman, age 44, Kakamega)

Although some women described improved community awareness of violence through the baraza, other participants focused on their improved knowledge of their rights. Several women reported that the CWDG taught them rights-based knowledge that they were able to implement in their lives in a way that they perceived to be responsible for reductions of sexual and domestic violence:

The violence rates have really gone down, I can attribute this to the fact that initially most women were not aware of their rights but right now they have began to understand their rights and how to fight for them. (Woman, age 50, Kakamega)

Although most women reported that they learned about their rights regarding violence, a few women reported that men also gained rights-based knowledge:

Men are now coming away from saying that women are not their property. Why? The lessons we have got from where, the Watch Dog. This has made a difference . . . women now have been helped because of the lessons received. Everybody knows their rights. (Woman, age 34, Kendu Bay)

#### **The availability of a community-level mechanism for reporting violence—**

Although women perceived that improved rights-based knowledge about women’s rights and sexual and domestic violence helped to decrease rates of violence, women also perceived that having community-level mechanisms to report and respond to cases of violence contributed to reduced rates of violence. Participants frequently described the existence of this community-led mechanism for reporting violence as a prime reason for the reduction in violence:

Where did we used to go? What would anybody do to you? Someone would just tell you “Take me to court” knowing very well that you will not do it or the logistics of doing that are too great for you. Now the CWDG deals with these matters. (Woman, age 56, Kakamega)

One participant highlighted a very common theme in our sample—that women were confident that there would be a response to their reports:

We would just be beaten more without the CWDG. Because without it, there is nowhere you will go, and you will also be told that a woman has no right. But now women know that women have the right . . . that the Community Watch Dog Groups are there to support them. So they know that if you beat someone’s wife or even if you beat your wife, and if she goes there . . . you will be arrested. She will

go to the Watch Dog and the Watch Dog will come and arrest you and take action against you . . . that . . . why did you beat someone? (Woman, age 43, Kendu Bay)

**Comprehensive response to reported cases of violence**—In addition to the availability of a community-level mechanism for reporting violence, many women described how there was also an improved response to reports of violence. Prior to the implementation of the CWDGs, women reported that traditional leaders and government officials were unresponsive to women’s charges of sexual and domestic violence, either blaming women for the abusive situations that they experienced or telling women that this should be worked out as a private issue. The women in our sample explained that when the CWDG was implemented, it helped to “watch” or keep local officials accountable and responsive to reports of sexual and domestic violence, disinheritance, and violence during the disinheritance process. The CWDG was therefore described as helping to move cases forward with the police and court systems and to offer a more comprehensive range of responses to women’s reports of violence including advice, mediation with perpetrators, documentation of abuses and referral for medical treatment, follow-ups and home visits to ensure that abuse was not continuing, involvement of the police and courts, and working with local authorities. One interviewee detailed how the CWDG responds when a woman reports that she is experiencing violence:

After they have been violated at home, they will go to the CWDG office and they will listen to what they have to say. After that, the CWDG will summon the village elder from where this lady came from and ask him if he is aware of this case and if he says he is aware of it, she will ask what steps have been taken. So in the long run, they will summon the person or people who are abusing this lady and they will talk to both parties and before they leave, the offenders are given stern warnings that the CWDG has powers to take legal action against them, when they hear that, they get afraid and they stop harassing this lady like they were doing. (Woman, age 64, Kakamega)

One participant described the different phases of the CWDG’s response to reports of violence:

They first listen to the problem how it began, how the problem as done what . . . reached. So here if . . . it’s not a very serious issue, they come, they talk to these people who have fallen out then they reach a consensus. But if they cannot agree, they then take the issue to the chief. Then if it is also not possible at the chief’s level, then they take the matter to the police. So the matter is left with the police. If it’s not possible then it is taken to the court. (Woman, age 38, Kendu Bay)

Another interviewee reported that the CWDG helped women to understand how they could be protected when they were experiencing disinheritance or sexual and domestic violence—or both at the same time:

If you are beaten as you are denied access to property . . . the case is now changing . . . or it is even becoming bigger . . . it’s not only now that you’re being evicted from your home, but this is also an assault case where you are beaten. So you can go for a P3 [legal document which one can use in court to show that one

has been assaulted] . . . and have a case against the person who beat you or cut you . . . and also a case for the disinheritance. The law provides and takes care of women that they should not be beaten . . . they should not be physically abused . . . (Woman, age 44, Kakamega)

**Men’s fear of consequences for enacting violence**—In addition to improved education about women’s rights and violence against women, and the availability of a community-level reporting mechanism that was responsive to reports of violence, women also perceived that the rate of sexual and domestic violence went down in the community because in-laws, co-wives, and other family members feared the legal consequences of violent behavior:

There is less violence now because they [perpetrators of violence] now believe, “If you go to CWDG, they will show you a way out of violence now . . . let us be careful,” so there is that change. Or, they spotted you with a CWDG member and they will wonder, “What was she telling her?” Maybe if there has been violence and then the CWDG shares with that woman, even just being seen with them, it becomes as something that is really a change, because once a CWDG member just appears with that woman, you will hear, “Your wife was with so and so therefore you should stop that violence, if you continue, you will see the consequences,” so there is that fear. (Woman, age 43, Kakamega)

Specific reductions in intimate partner violence were attributed to men’s fear of legal consequences:

Cases of violence within the home, it has reduced because the men are saying but these days you beat a woman the likes of so and so you will be taken to court. Even the men say it jokingly that nowadays if you beat a woman you may be arrested and you have beaten your wife. So to me it is a plus because men know that when they beat women there are some people and that is why the name Watch Dog really is good for these people because even the men who used to beat women now know that if you beat your woman somebody is watching you and can make you sleep in a cell. (Woman, age 45, Kendu Bay)

## Discussion

To lay the groundwork for a future study that quantitatively tests a land and property rights program as a structural-level violence reduction mechanism, we first sought to qualitatively understand the perceived impact of this innovative, community-based, property rights model. Through in-depth interviews with women who had reported cases of property rights violations to a Community Land and Property Watch Dog Model, we sought to understand whether this reporting mechanism exacerbated or decreased women’s experiences with violence from in-laws, husbands, co-wives, and other family members. Nearly all of the women in our sample reported that violence at the individual level ceased immediately on reporting cases of violent disinheritance to the CWDG. In addition, women perceived that the presence of the CWDG led to a broader reduction in sexual and domestic violence against women at the community level. Women identified four reasons to explain their

perceptions that reductions in sexual and domestic violence had occurred, in their view: (a) improved individual- and community-level knowledge about women's rights and violence against women provided through education and discussion at community barazas, (b) the existence of a community-based mechanism for reporting cases of violence, (c) the responsiveness of the CWDG to cases of violence, and (d) fears that perpetrators had about the legal consequences of perpetrating violence.

Little research in the violence-prevention science base to date has involved an examination of community-led efforts that address the reciprocal impact of women's property rights violations and violence against women. Qualitative data from this study respond to the gaps in structural violence-prevention research and provide a preliminary understanding of what factors may be responsible for reductions in violence.

Future research should attempt to understand the factors that drive some widows to be more vulnerable to property rights violations, disinheritance, and violence than others. Future research should also attempt to understand more about the specific mechanisms through which property ownership may work to reduce violence against women (e.g., a few women reported that having a female child instead of a male child increased the likelihood of disinheritance and violence during dispossession). Both of these types of research can be critical for understanding the development of future structural and policy interventions that sit at the juncture of land and property and violence against women.

Participants in the CWDG perceived a decrease in violence against women at the individual and community levels. However, it may be the case that broader efforts to secure women's access to and ownership of land may increase violence in other instances or regions. Some scholars argue that land rights could intensify violence, particularly given that the constitution now protects women's property rights; however, these protections have not necessarily been fully incorporated into customary land ownership practices (Peters, 2004, 2009). Thus, it is possible that broader constitutional shifts may intensify conflict on the ground, and as such, it would be important for CWDGs to expand their mission to reduce gender-based violence not only at the time of the initial report, but over the long term (Peters, 2009).

Our study has several limitations. First, all of the respondents in our sample were women who had been served by the program we studied and, therefore, response bias is likely present given their potential personal investment in the success of the program being studied. To reduce this particular bias, we hired researchers who were external to the program and utilized a large number of interview probes and follow-up questions to ensure consistency and accuracy in responses. Second, although our sample was drawn randomly, it may not be fully representative of all beneficiaries of this program. Third, our results are not generalizable to all regions in Kenya, nor to all programs that work at the intersection of property rights and health outcomes.

Fourth, although we did capture participants' descriptions of different types of violence (verbal, physical, death threats) during the analytical coding process, we did not specifically probe for all types of violence during each interview. This led us to focus on the types of

violence that each participant brought up, but does not provide a complete account of the type of violence that each individual may have experienced. Fifth, we cannot definitively conclude that violence decreased at the community level because not only are these responses based on perceptions, but our sample also does not include a comparison group of women who were not involved with the CWDG nor a longitudinal study design. Sixth, future studies should have longer follow-up periods to ascertain whether or not reductions in violence are maintained beyond the 3–6 months time frame used in this study.

We recognize that other violence reduction interventions are certainly worth exploring and bolstering, including clinic- and family-based interventions, changing community-level gender norms, an analysis and reform of law, building the capacity of community-level stakeholders on rights-based knowledge related to violence, promoting the judicial capacity of actors in the formal justice system, and more. In the future, our team intends to draw on rigorous measures of physical and sexual violence and verbal abuse and test the impact of this innovative property rights program against current best evidence-based violence-prevention strategies. This would help to discern the efficacy of this structural intervention approach relative to other violence-prevention approaches. We agree with scholars who report that, “The current intervention literature focuses on micro-finance, and there is a need for research on the benefits of other forms of intervention that aim to increase women’s access to financial resources or empower them socially” (Vyas & Watts, 2009, p. 598). Given that the WHO (2009) and others report that violence against women is one of the most pervasive and recalcitrant global health issues, “dismantling hierarchical constructions of masculinity and femininity predicated on the control of women, and eliminating the structural factors that support inequalities are likely to make a significant contribution” (Patel, 2011). Property rights programming is one such structural solution that is worth testing in the science base for its efficacy at disrupting entrenched gender inequalities and violence against women.

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## Biographies

**Starr Hilliard** is a second year medical student at Tulane University. She received an MS in global health sciences from the University of California at San Francisco in 2012.

**Elizabeth Bukusi** is the chief research officer and deputy director of research training at the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI). She is also the co-director of the Research Care Training Program at the Center for Microbiology Research at KEMRI.

**Shelly Grabe** is associate professor of psychology in the social science division at the University of California at Santa Cruz and holds affiliations in the Humanities Division, the Feminist Studies Department, and Latin America and Latino Studies. She is currently working on three transnational projects exploring: (1) the role of land ownership in empowerment processes and gender-based violence in Nicaragua, (2) land ownership, civic participation, and violence among women in Tanzania, and (3) the role of the grass-roots social movement in promoting justice for women in Nicaragua.

**Tiffany Lu** received her medical degree from the University of California at San Francisco. She works in Internal Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

**Abigail M. Hatcher** is a senior researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of California, San Francisco. She has expertise in the design and testing of interventions for intimate partner violence and HIV engagement in care.

**Zachary Kwena** is a social scientist who is focused on HIV prevention, treatment, and care and is a researcher at the Kenya Medical Research Institute in the Center for Microbiology Research in Kisumu, Kenya.

**Esther Mwaura-Muiru** is the founder and national coordinator for Women Organizing Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS-Kenya) based in Nairobi. GROOTS is a network of more than 2,000 women in community and self-help groups and organizations across Kenya. The goal of GROOTS-Kenya is to “ensure that grassroots women are the masters of their own destiny.”

**Shari L. Dworkin** is professor of sociology and associate dean for academic affairs in the UCSF School of Nursing. Her research is focused on structural interventions for HIV prevention, treatment, and care. Another main research area is centered on masculinities based gender transformative health interventions with heterosexually active men.

**Table 1**

## Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants.

	<i>N</i> = 30	%
Age		
30–39	3	10
40–49	14	47
50–59	9	30
60+	4	13
Ethnicity		
Luhya	17	57
Luo	12	40
Maragoli	1	3
Marital status		
Married	3	10
Widowed	27	90
Number of living, biological children		
0–2	7	23
3–5	12	40
6–8	11	37
Level of education		
No education	3	10
Incomplete primary	7	23
Complete primary	1	3
Incomplete secondary	9	32
Complete secondary	5	16
No data	5	16