

**LAND AND GENDER-BASED
VIOLENCE**

Rwanda/Liberia



➔ Land rights can increase a woman’s economic independence, reducing her vulnerability to GBV, but this positive correlation is dependent on context and culture. (Above) Women’s growers association in Tanzania. *Photo: USAID/Tanzania*

By Ailey Kaiser Hughes and Amanda Richardson

INTRODUCTION

A growing body of evidence shows a correlation between gender-based violence (GBV) and land rights, although more research is needed to understand the many dimensions of this relationship, and its implications for social and economic development. Particularly in low-income, agriculture-based economies, research shows that secure land rights can increase a woman’s economic independence and her bargaining power, reducing her vulnerability to GBV (USAID 2013). However, research also suggests that the correlation between GBV and women’s land and property rights is highly variable and context- and culture-dependent.

Many sub-Saharan African countries lack systematic and reliable data on GBV, but studies suggest that GBV is prevalent in the region. In Kenya, for example, 43 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 49 have experienced GBV. In Zambia, 59 percent of women have experienced violence since the age of 15 (cited in Rumbold 2008, pg. 7). In Liberia, 66 percent of women were subjected to GBV during the civil conflicts between 1989 and 2003 (GOL 2011).



Ailey Kaiser Hughes is a social scientist and land tenure specialist at Landesa.

Amanda Richardson is an attorney and land and gender specialist, and cofounder of the Center for Gender and Resource Equity.



Globally, an estimated 35 percent of women have experienced GBV.



GBV is a global issue that affects women from all socioeconomic groups, regardless of country, race, ethnicity, and religion. (Above) Farmer in Liberia surveys her land, which has been burned in preparation for planting. *Photo: Anna Knox*

While these statistics indicate that GBV is a profound problem in many parts of Africa, the continent is not unique in this regard. GBV is a global issue. It affects women from all socioeconomic groups regardless of country, race, ethnicity, and religion (Pickup 2001, pg. 11). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that, globally, 35 percent of women have experienced GBV (WHO 2014). In a recent report, UN Women notes that in 17 out of 41 countries reviewed, more than 25 percent of the population believes that it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife (UN Women 2011).

GBV is more than just physical violence. The UN defines it as “any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women 1993).

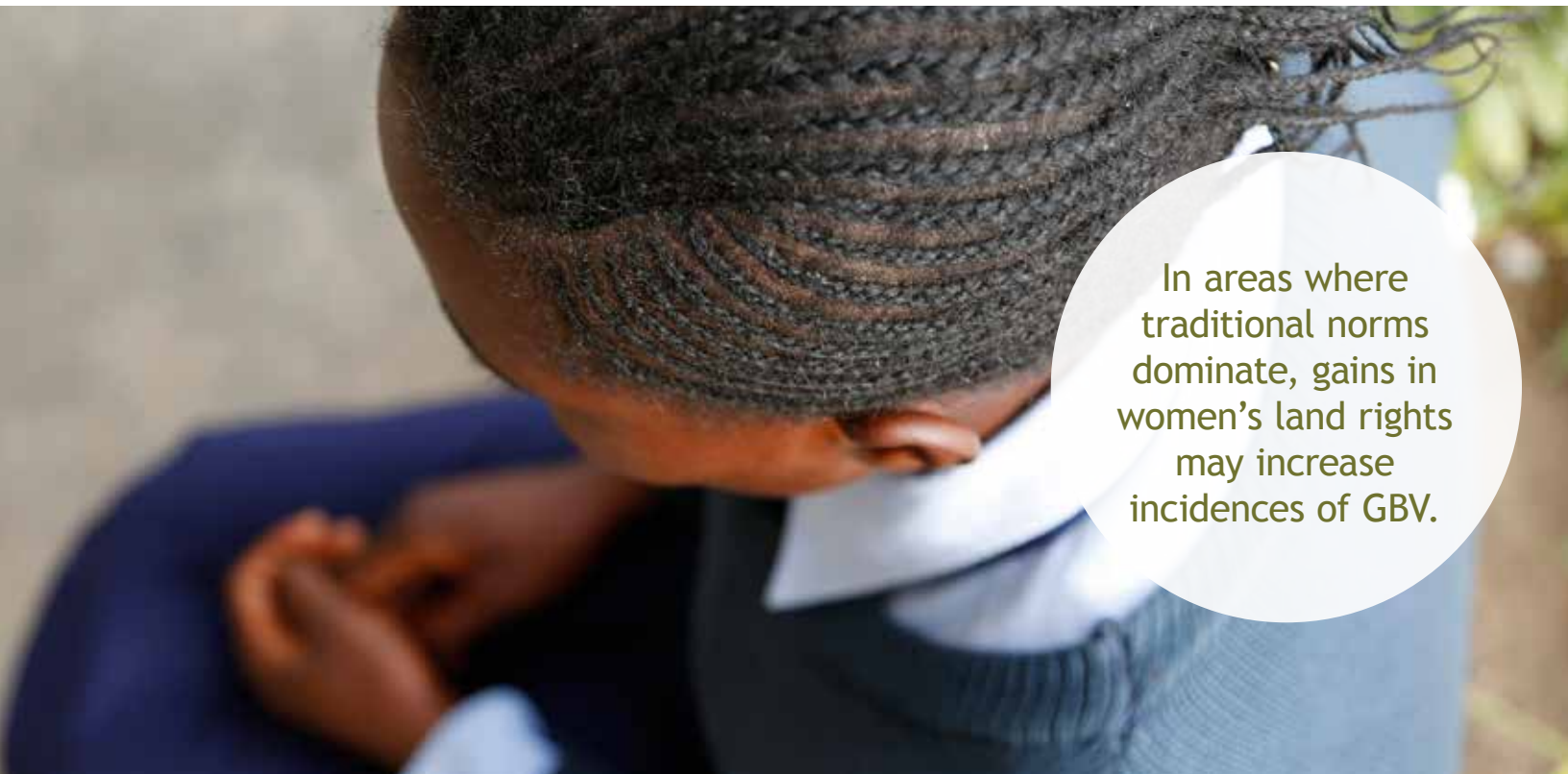
GBV is often rooted in unequal power relations between men and women, and is therefore connected to social and economic inequality. As noted by the UN Commission on the Status of Women, “the ability of women to protect themselves from violence requires the realization of their socio-economic rights, particularly those regarding land, property, and inheritance” (ICRW 2010, pg. 5).

Research shows that secure land rights can increase a woman’s economic independence and her bargaining power, reducing her vulnerability to GBV (USAID 2013). For women, secure land tenure means that their rights to land are legally and socially legitimate; can withstand changes in the family and in the community; are enforceable; are long-term or for a known duration; and are exercisable by women in the same way that they are for men. Secure land rights can empower women socially and economically, and may give women more freedom to leave abusive relationships and to make financial decisions that can alleviate or prevent the incidence of GBV (Ibid).

THE LINK BETWEEN LAND AND GBV: EVIDENCE FROM THE LITERATURE

Little research has been conducted on the links between land and GBV, and there are only a few studies from the continent of Africa. Rather, researchers have focused on the complex relationships among economic power, social status, and GBV. The available research suggests that there is a correlation between GBV and women’s land and property rights, but that it is highly variable and context- and culture-dependent. Factors such as women’s economic independence, status in the household, and the cultural norms of her community may determine whether this correlation is positive or negative.

Most of the research on the direct connection between GBV and property rights comes from India, where more than two-thirds of the population is rural (NDTV 2013). A 2005 study of women in Kerala found that women who owned their own homes had a lower risk of marital violence than women



In areas where traditional norms dominate, gains in women's land rights may increase incidences of GBV.



The fundamental cause of GBV is power asymmetry between men and women, which perpetuates male dominance over women. (Above) This Zambian girl suffered domestic violence as a young wife. *Photo: Jessica Lea/DFID*

who did not own a house and land (Panda 2005, pp 823-850). Forty-nine percent of women without a house and land experienced domestic violence, compared to 18 percent of women who owned land, and just 7 percent of those who owned both a house and land (Ibid).

A later study in Uttar Pradesh looked at the effect of home ownership on intimate partner violence. It concluded that “women’s ownership of property has a large effect on reducing violence,” perhaps because the increased economic security from owning property made women less willing to tolerate violence, while providing an exit strategy for those who needed it (Bhattacharyya 2009, pp 1676-1689).

These conclusions are supported by a number of other studies from South Asia, Latin America, and Africa, which show that stronger land rights for women provide an important source of income, economic independence, and bargaining power, which reduces women’s dependency on their partners and thus their risk of experiencing GBV (Giovarelli 2007, Katz 2002, ICRW 2008, Chowdry 2011). In a recent study in South

Africa and Uganda, women identified increased economic opportunity, which secure land rights provide, as the most important way to combat domestic violence, as it leads to increased control over the management of their household and personal affairs (IRC 2012).

Unequal power relations between men and women are among the strongest predictors of domestic violence, and women’s ownership of land and other assets can help equalize these power relations (Baksh 20013, Resko 2010). Owning land can give women intangible benefits, such as social clout and feelings of empowerment. Owning assets has been found to empower women in their relationships and to give them a stronger voice in public forums (Agarwal 2002, Katz 2002). Women with secure rights to land may have enough economic and psychological security to free themselves from violent situations. For instance, surveys conducted in rural Nicaragua found that land ownership among women increases women’s power and control within the marital relationship and reduces her exposure to domestic violence (Grabe 2010).

The majority of current research suggests this positive correlation between land ownership and reduced GBV. However, some studies find no correlation or a negative correlation between stronger land and property rights and GBV. For example, one study undertaken in Uganda attributed an increased incidence in GBV against women who owned land to strong traditional norms against women’s land ownership (Ezeh 2000). The researchers found that when men felt their authority in the home was challenged, they responded with physical violence against their spouses (Ibid).

Similarly, studies in Bangladesh, Ecuador, and Ghana found that the effects of property ownership on GBV greatly depend on the community and cultural context: in areas where traditional norms dominate, gains in women’s property ownership and employment status seemed to increase the risk of domestic violence (Oduro 2012, Koenig 2003). In some cases, a woman’s increased economic power might lead to violence from men seeking to reassert their dominance and power in the home (Jewkes 2002).

WOMEN EXERCISING THEIR LAND RIGHTS: EXPERIENCE FROM RWANDA

The complexity outlined above is reflected in Rwanda, where control over land and land disputes affecting women are correlated with intra-family GBV. GBV is a significant problem overall in Rwanda, where 35 percent of Rwandan women have reported experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional violence from a spouse or partner. It is probable that many more cases are unreported (CARE 2010).

A land dispute management project in Rwanda's Eastern Province anecdotally found that women who sought to exercise their land rights, and particularly women who objected to infringement of their rights, were exposed to GBV within their families. The USAID-funded project, led by the global nonprofit Landesa,¹ found a range of circumstances under which women

experienced GBV. These included, but were not limited to:

- A woman refuses to support her husband in selling their land, so he physically abuses her. She flees to her parents' home and he sells the land without her consent.
- A woman's husband accuses her of siding with his enemy in a land dispute, so he physically and psychologically abuses her and their children.
- A childless widow's in-laws want her to leave the land she shared with her deceased husband, but she objects. They harass her and take her property without her consent. She feels certain that she could be killed as a result of this conflict.
- A woman's son is displeased with the share of land that she has given him, so he demands a larger share from her and threatens her with physical violence.

- Women are isolated and threatened by family when they raise land disputes with local authorities.

Such cases are not limited to the Eastern Province. A multi-province qualitative study found that women who bring land disputes to local authorities face "dire consequences, including physical violence, by their husband and his family" (Jones-Casey et al. 2014, pg. 4).

Though Rwanda's legal framework supports women's land rights, these rights are not perceived to be legitimate by many within rural communities. While norms are changing, many women's rights are based upon their relationship to men, and therefore subject to change in cases of divorce, widowhood and abandonment. Rwandan women thus have weaker authority over household decision-making in regards to land use and management. Though they may be joint owners of household property under the law, they might



Land rights can increase women's authority within the household. In some contexts, this has been found to reduce women's exposure to GBV, while in others the challenge to male authority led to increased incidences of GBV. Photo: Jessica Lea/DFID





Further research and monitoring of GBV in land-related projects will lead to a better understanding of the relationship between land rights and GBV. *Photo: Jessica Lea/DFID*

still be coerced or “convinced” through physical and emotional violence to agree to decisions regarding land they would otherwise reject (Jones-Casey et al. 2014, pg. 51).

DISPLACED WOMEN: EXPERIENCE FROM LIBERIA

As in Rwanda, the connections between GBV and land rights in Liberia are complex. During the civil conflicts between 1989 and 2003, approximately 66 percent of Liberian women were subjected to GBV, a problem which continues today (GOL 2011). Though GBV often goes unreported, the 2007 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey found that 49 percent of women surveyed had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by an intimate partner (LISGIS 2008).

In 2013, Landesa and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) carried out qualitative field research² in urban and

peri-urban areas in Liberia’s capital city, Monrovia, to explore the connection between GBV and housing, land, and property rights. From 1999 to 2003, Liberians from all over the country had taken refuge in Monrovia, tripling its population. Consequently, most of the city’s current residents live in informal settlements and are unwilling or unable to return home (NRC 2011).

Researchers found that women face greater obstacles to gaining property rights than men do, and were less likely to have documents providing evidence of those rights. They also found that GBV, especially when carried out by an intimate partner, was common and tolerated by local communities. However, despite this exposure to GBV, women valued their relationships with men, in part because they could provide economic assistance and security against others.

The study found that the primary form of overlap between GBV and housing,

land, and property rights was violence related to how household economic assets (including cash, housing, and moveable property) were divided. Women in the study area tended to be in informal relationships, and therefore lacked the protections of formal law or custom accorded to married women. Men controlled use of household income, and used that control over resources to physically control women and to constrain their life choices. If men in the study area perceived their power to be threatened or questioned, they sometimes used physical and/or sexual violence as a form of reprisal or control.

Because men in Liberia have more control over and access to housing, land, and property, women are often reliant on their relationships with men for those essentials. This was particularly true for abandoned women and teenage girls, who often engaged in transactional sex, especially in exchange for housing.

WAYS FORWARD

The relationship between land and gender-based violence is complex and dependent on cultural contexts. As seen in Rwanda and Liberia, much more research is needed to better understand this relationship. However, it is clear that interventions focused on addressing the issue should include men and women, as well as institutions that “promote and sustain gender inequalities” (Pickup 2001, pg. 19-20), such as customary and formal governance institutions.

Because interventions to increase women’s land tenure security may be either positively or negatively correlated with GBV, this relationship must be considered in the design and implementation of programs. Therefore, it is recommended that to understand and address the challenge of GBV, projects proactively incorporate GBV monitoring and mitigation strategies that will enable them to adapt and respond. Ultimately, such attention and research will result in a better understanding of the complex relationship between land rights and GBV.

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¹ The authors of this brief participated in this project.

² Amanda Richardson, a co-author of this brief, participated in this project.

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