Reproductive Justice: The Role of Community-Based Organizational Participation in Reproductive Decision-Making and Educational Aspirations among Women in Nicaragua

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Across the world, women experience violations to their reproductive health and threats to their educational aspirations that limit their achievement. Reproductive health and education are examples of women’s human rights that are connected by systemic gender inequalities that lead millions of women to experience discrimination and stereotyping that threaten these basic rights. The current study uses a reproductive justice framework to examine how a community-based organization led by a group of women in rural Nicaragua challenges gendered psychosocial processes related to women’s rights violations. In partnership with a grassroots local organization, we used structural equation modeling to demonstrate, in a sample of almost 300 women, that organizational participation was positively related to women’s reproductive decision-making and educational aspiration, in part due to relationships with women’s self-esteem and sense of powerlessness in sociopolitical matters. Given the persistent role of gendered inequities in the reproductive decision-making and educational aspirations of girls and women,
considering the social-structural contexts that enable or limit rights is imperative to creating viable routes to gender justice.

Women and girls’ reproductive health and access to education are recognized throughout the world as examples of human rights. In fact, the United Nation’s Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) contains two articles that specifically address discrimination against women in educational achievement and reproductive health (Articles 10 and 12, respectively; CEDAW, 1979). As of 2019, more than 189 countries have ratified the convention agreeing to provisions laid out in the articles (UN Treaty Collections, 2019). Nevertheless, the world over, women continue to experience violations to their reproductive health and threats to educational aspiration that limit their achievement. For example, women in many parts of the world are denied birth control or abortion access, and discriminatory stereotypes and limited opportunities threaten girls’ and women’s educational aspirations nearly everywhere (Kismödi et al., 2012; UN Women, 2015). Given the persistent role of gendered sociostructural inequities in the reproductive decision-making and educational aspirations of girls and women, trying to understand how to enhance these rights, without considering the social-structural contexts that enable or limit rights, is not enough to create viable routes to gender justice.

In the context of persistent rights violations, it is imperative to examine the psychological processes related to violations, and what may influence them, in a manner that can lead to the actualization of women’s rights. The current study assesses how organizational participation interrupts sociocultural norms related to structural oppression by impacting women’s self-esteem and sense of powerlessness, thereby increasing the potential for women’s reproductive decision-making and educational aspiration. Moreover, it should be recognized that because human rights violations are shaped by systemic oppressions, threats to reproductive and educational rights are a greater risk among women from additional marginalized social locations (e.g., women of Color, low-income, majority world). The current study takes a reproductive justice approach to understanding women’s reproductive decision-making and educational aspiration, specifically, by examining how a community-based organization led by a group of women in Nicaragua challenges gendered psychosocial processes related to women’s rights violations (Ross, 2009; Zucker, 2014).

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1Given that the commonly used terms “developing” and “third world” are often used by so-called “first world” nations to describe the relatively low economic well-being of another country in a manner that implies inferiority, we use the term majority world, borrowed from Cigdem Kagitcibasi (2002) and Kurtiş and Adams (2015) because individuals from “developing” countries constitute the majority of the world’s population.
Reproductive Justice

Human Rights and Reproductive Justice

International conventions, such as the United Nations’ CEDAW, strive to provide legal frameworks through which women’s human rights can be protected. Indeed, much that is written about reproductive health has been from a rights, or law-focused perspective (Luna & Luker, 2013). However, this focus inadvertently prioritized efforts led by predominately White women to attain and defend legal rights, with little attention afforded to understanding how sociocultural contexts enable or limit the actualization of women’s rights (Luna & Luker, 2013; Silliman, Fried, Ross, & Gutiérrez, 2016). It is plausible that violations against women continue so persistently because a rights-based approach that fails to consider power structures and sociocultural norms that inhibit women cannot adequately alter the contexts in which most women experience violations to their rights. A focus on reproductive justice, rather than reproductive rights, instead emphasizes the sociostructural factors that foster women’s marginalization, as well as community-developed solutions to structural inequalities (Luna & Luker, 2013). Given the persistent violation of women’s reproductive and educational rights throughout the world, there remains a crucial need to explore how structural inequities sustain women’s rights violations and to better understand the psychosocial processes that facilitate justice.

To date, processes that fuel individuals committed to gendered justice, in general, have received only limited attention from the discipline of psychology. Mainstream psychology has, with few exceptions, largely neglected the voices of globally marginalized women and women of Color in understanding action aimed at change (see Lykes, 1997 for an exception). For example, much of mainstream feminist work in psychology has developed theories and understanding of gender oppression in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic (or WEIRD; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) contexts and imposed those perspectives across varied settings for understanding what has been conceptualized as “universal” gendered oppression. More specifically, most mainstream psychology employs methodologies that involve sampling predominately White undergraduate college students at U.S. universities. Although recent years have witnessed the introduction of reproductive justice frameworks within psychology (e.g., Chrisler, 2012), what remains necessary are empirical investigations examining and analyzing the influence of power structures and sociocultural norms in women’s rights violations from this perspective.

Moreover, a close examination of the scholarship on reproductive rights unveils that prior research investigating experiences for women of Color often focuses on the abuses they have suffered, rather than considering women of Color’s perspective and experiences as reflecting legitimate sources of knowledge (Silliman et al., 2016; for an exception see Smith, Sundstrom, & Delay, 2020). An underlying goal of social justice research is a reconfiguration of knowledge production
that shifts power and control into the hands of the oppressed or marginalized (Fals Borda, 1985; Sandoval, 2000). Therefore, the current study was designed in accordance with Mohanty’s (2003) assertion that understanding women’s struggles for justice must involve illuminating majority-world women’s engagement with resistance. Although most of the reproductive organizing done by women throughout the world has been undocumented and unanalyzed, this study aims to “put the activism of women of color in the foreground” (Silliman et al., 2016, p. 8) by taking the position that feminist activists in a majority world are setting an example for rethinking conventional scientific wisdom and illuminating concepts related to the broad project of justice (Martín-Baró, 1994; Swarr & Nagar, 2012).

Nicaragua: Historical and Social Context

Although efforts to enhance women’s rights are not unique to any part of the world, organizations involved in the Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres (MAM; Women’s Autonomous Movement) in Nicaragua provide an ideal context for examining community mobilized efforts to challenge the structural oppressions that marginalize women. Like many Latin American social movements in the 1970s and 1980s, the women’s movement in Nicaragua emerged in the context of dictatorial regimes as a marginalized and restricted movement (Molyneux, 2001). However, by 1992 Nicaragua had the largest, most pluralistic, and most autonomous feminist movement in Central America (Kampwirth, 1996).

Since its conception, the movement has strategically organized to advance women’s rights—with violations of women’s reproductive health and education being at the forefront of activist efforts. A focus on these particular rights has been prioritized because, for example, Nicaragua is one of few countries in the world with a total ban on abortion. Women’s rights advocates in Nicaragua have fought decades for policy changes recognizing that the restrictive laws on abortion put girls and women’s health and lives at risk (Grabe, 2016a). Moreover, because Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the region, reliance on girls and women to contribute to family income from an early age has the potential to interrupt many girls’ educational aspirations. For example, starting at 15 years of age, nearly 80% of the informal sector service in Nicaragua is female (World Bank, 2017).

The Women’s Autonomous Movement in Nicaragua has focused on promoting women’s organizations that address violations of women’s rights that are locally and contextually relevant (Kampwirth, 2008; Molyneux, 1985). The organization of focus in the current study, Centro de Mujeres Xochilt Acalt (Xochilt Acalt Women’s Center), emerged out of the women’s movement as an effort to support women in the rural sector. The organization formed shortly after a conservative shift in presidential power in 1990 introduced several structural adjustment policies that yielded severe cutbacks to public sector commitments that disproportionately impacted women. These new economic policies were associated with
weakening the already precarious governmental support for women’s rights. It was within this context of increasing structural marginalization that Xochitl Acalt was founded by a self-mobilized group of women in 1992. The initial aims of the organization were rooted in women’s reproductive health (i.e., addressing high levels of cervical/uterine cancer), though over the course of the next several decades the aims expanded to address additional problems and demands from women in the local community that included: illiteracy, lack of food, limited resources for family planning, high levels of gender-based violence, male migration for work, and a need to improve unequal power relations between women and men (Montenegro & Cuadra, 2004).

Because a number of women’s concerns were tied to their cultural, social, economic, and political locations as women, the organization developed educational and justice-oriented workshops to expand women’s knowledge of their human rights and the availability of resources in their community. The workshops were developed in the tradition of Freire’s (1972) theories of social change, and aimed to enhance women’s knowledge about their rights and capability to contribute to social change through consciousness-raising processes. For example, within the workshops women communally discussed and reflected upon topics including gender roles and identity; sources and consequences of poverty; violence; and gender inequality (Montenegro & Cuadra, 2004). Additionally, information about opportunities for women to participate in activities, such as political decision-making and reproductive and economic rights activism, were provided and discussed. Workshops within the organization were all led by women who had previously completed workshops and had received training on facilitation. The purpose of the current study was to examine how participation in the organization was related to: (1) women’s increased ability to voice concerns related to reproductive decision-making with their partners due, in part, to its relation to self-esteem and (2) women’s educational aspiration due, in part, to its relation to a sense of powerlessness in sociopolitical matters.

**Self-Esteem and Reproductive Decision-Making**

One way that self-esteem may impact psychosocial processes is in women’s ability to negotiate needs and desires in their relationships with their husbands. It has been demonstrated that women’s limited ability to exercise agency over their lives is related to the suppression of reproductive rights, including the inability to refuse unwanted sex or assert the desire to use birth control and protection (Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005; Sternberg, 2000). If women do not feel they have the right to voice their opinions, it may be difficult to engage in reproductive decision-making with their male partners. Resiliency theories suggest that individuals with high self-esteem may be buffered from engaging in health compromising behaviors in high-risk environments (Garmezy, 1991).
Among adolescent girls, lower self-esteem has been linked to early intercourse, increased number of sexual partners, having had a child, and STD diagnosis (Fisher, Schneider, Pegler, & Napolitano, 1991; Gardner, Frank, & Amankwaa, 1998; Kowaleski-Jones & Mott, 1998; MacDonald & Martineau, 2002; Spencer, Zimet, Aalsma, & Orr, 2002). Research has also found a relationship between women’s self-esteem and condom use (Abel, 1998; Somlai et al., 2000; Tigges, 2001), effective condom negotiation (Ghobadzadeh, 2014; Salazar et al., 2005), and involvement in high-risk sexual behaviors (e.g., Beadnell, Baker, Morrison, & Knox, 2000; Cole, 1997; Gullette & Lyons, 2006; Sterk, Klein, & Elifson, 2004; Wild, Flisher, Bhana, & Lombard, 2004; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). Moreover, self-esteem has been related to constructs such as communication and negotiation skills (Braithwaite & Thomas, 2001; McCree, 1997), suggesting that self-esteem may play an important role in women’s reproductive decision-making and may be one route to address processes that threaten these rights.

Although many studies in this area of inquiry have focused on young White women (Goodson et al., 2006), it is possible that psychological processes related to reproductive decision-making impact Latinas in culturally dependent ways. Limited investigation among Latinas in the United States suggests that gendered expectations of who initiates condom-use can limit Latinas’ sexual decision-making in order to avoid being labeled as promiscuous or sexually experienced (Castañeda & Collins, 1998; Marín & Gómez, 1997). Similarly, additional research conducted among Latinas has found that gendered scripts, which impose a passive role in sexual decision-making, can limit women’s ability to prevent sexually transmitted infections (Altschuler & Rhee, 2015; Jacobs, & Kane, 2011; Salazar et al., 2005). Although experiences of Latinas in the United States and women from Latin America differ in a number of regards, it is also possible that shared experiences surrounding cultural heritage and gender role socialization make previous scholarship conducted with U.S. Latinas more relevant than the scholarship conducted with predominately White college students (Bowleg, Belgrave, & Reisen, 2000).

In sum, the bulk of findings in this literature lend reason to hypothesize that women’s self-esteem may be related to their reproductive decision-making. Given that women’s self-esteem is linked to larger sociocultural structures surrounding gender inequity (Mahaffy, 2004), it is imperative to examine how social change interventions aimed at shifting women’s psychosocial experience may be related to women’s reproductive justice. Prior research has found that community interventions raising gender and sexual health awareness have been linked to increases in women’s self-esteem (Katz, Joiner, & Kwon, 2002; Macalister, 1999; Saleh-onoya et al., 2009). Therefore, in the current study we explicitly examined whether self-esteem might help explain the impact of organizational participation on reproductive decision-making of women living in a rural area of Central America.
Another psychosocial process relevant to the actualization of women’s rights is women’s sense of powerlessness in sociopolitical matters and its relation to educational aspiration. Policies and practices throughout the world often exclude the participation of marginalized community members from the public sphere by making it more difficult for oppressed groups to gain access to education and training which can be considered either implicit or explicit requirements for greater societal participation (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough & Halsey, 2006). However, relatively little psychological research examines the relationship between women’s perceived sense of powerlessness and educational aspirations (for an exception, see McLaren, 1982). Nevertheless, there is research to suggest that perceived systemic barriers and gender roles influence women’s educational aspirations (Holms & Esses, 1988; Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003; Meinster & Rose, 2001; Rothon, Srephin, Klineberg, Cattell, & Stansfeld, 2011). It is possible that perceived systemic barriers and the belief that gender roles are immutable reflect a sense of powerlessness in sociopolitical matters that can negatively impact women’s educational aspiration. In the absence of prior investigations that measure sense of powerlessness specifically, we review how perceived barriers and gender roles (as proxies) may be linked to women’s educational aspirations.

In the career psychology literature, it has been widely documented that girls’ educational aspirations are limited by systemic barriers. For instance, it has been demonstrated in the United States, that African American girls’ aspirations are hindered by financial barriers, limited access to educational opportunities, lacking community infrastructure, pregnancy-risk, and overall constraining sociohistorical inequities (Farmer et al., 2006; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016). Moreover, it has been found that White girls perceive fewer barriers to their aspirations than do their Latino and African American counterparts (Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012; McWhirter, 1997). There is also ample evidence that gender role expectations (e.g., family obligations and care-giving; prioritizing careers that help others) limit the educational aspiration of girls and women (Ceci & Williams, 2010; Eccles, 2011; Holms & Esses, 1988; Sandberg et al., 1991). In contrast, in egalitarian households that do not assign work and childcare based on gender roles, girls report higher aspirations to attain more education (Davis & Pearce, 2007).

Both of these proxies for sense of powerlessness—systemic barriers and immutable gender roles—have been linked to Latinas’ educational aspirations, specifically. For example, research centering Latinas experiences illustrates that perceived educational barriers negatively predict educational aspiration (Flores, Navarro, & DeWitz, 2008; Ojeda & Flores, 2008). More specifically, researchers have found that Latinas report perceived barriers related to family financial struggle, migration status, the pressure to work for income rather than study, and not
believing one has the intellectual capacity to receive admission as negatively impacting their educational aspiration (Gonzalez, Stein, & Huq, 2013; Irvin et al., 2012; McWhirter, Valdez, & Caban, 2013). Researchers in Latin America found that gender moderated the relation between individuals’ aspirations and career success among a Peruvian sample. Specifically, individual aspirations predicted career success for men, but not women to the extent that women reported career orientations related to a preference for balance between work and family (Dolan, Bejarano, & Tzafrir, 2011). Several studies have also documented the negative relation between gender role expectations (i.e., being the spiritual pillar of families, prioritizing careers that help others, family obligations, care-giving) and Latinas’ educational aspiration (Ojeda & Flores, 2008; Piña-Watson, Lorenzo-Blanco, Dornhecker, Martínez, & Nagoshi, 2016; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2019). These findings collectively suggest that girls and women’s perceptions related to the possibility of changing political structures (i.e., powerlessness in sociopolitical matters) may be linked to their aspirational goals.

In sum, these findings lend reason to suggest that perceptions of the social-structural context being immutable, or a sense of powerlessness, may negatively impact girls and women’s educational aspiration. Prior literature suggests that workshops aimed at raising awareness on the impact of systemic barriers such as racial oppression, economic struggles, and limited schooling have been found to have a positive effect on youth’s educational aspirations (Jackson et al., 2006). Because the organization in the current study facilitated women’s understanding of gender roles and experiences as related to systemic inequity, we explicitly examined whether sense of powerlessness in sociopolitical matters might help explain the impact of organizational participation on the educational aspiration of women.

The Current Study

One of the underlying goals of collaborative community-based research is to challenge assumptions about knowledge production and raise questions about the purpose of research. Furthermore, feminist approaches to epistemology share in common that women’s lived experiences are legitimate sources of knowledge and that feminist thinking and practice requires eliminating the boundaries of division that privilege who can be a knower and what can be known (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Warner, Settles, & Shields, 2016). Research employing a reproductive justice framework should give attention to whose voices are privileged in the production of scholarship that attempts to create a space for the expression of subjugated knowledge (Fals Borda, 1985).

As authors, we are writing from a highly educated social location within the United States underscoring unequal and complex relationships between the authors and the women included in this study. Of particular relevance in this case is
that the United States has a long history of economic exploitation and armed conflict in Nicaragua. Recognizing and understanding how power asymmetries may manifest in the research collaboration was key to this being a liberatory feminist project (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). For example, a critical communicative methodology was followed whereby an egalitarian dialogue between the researcher and leaders of the organization was central to designing and conducting the research (Gómez, Racionero, & Sordé, 2010). This approach is aligned with a reproductive justice framework focused on empowerment within communities of women and using research to contribute to transforming social contexts and improving the lives of the group being studied (for more discussion, see Grabe, 2016b,c).

The current study stemmed from a program of community-based partnership established between the first author and Xochilt Acalt that went back over 10 years (e.g., Grabe, 2010; Grabe, 2016a). The first author initially met the community leaders at Xochilt during a trip to Nicaragua in 2005 in which she visited several key women’s rural grassroots organizations that were working to transform gender inequity. Conversations with the organizational leaders led to a mutual interest in using research to support the social change efforts being made by the organization. For the current study, the first and third authors worked together with leaders of the organization to determine the study design and discuss the role of research within the organization’s agenda for change. Importantly, this collaboration involved recognizing that an underlying goal of the research was a reconfiguration of knowledge production that shifted power and control into the hands of the marginalized (Fals Borda, 1985).

**Participants**

Data were collected during February and March of 2015 in the municipality of Malpaisillo-Larreynaga in the department of León, Nicaragua. Participants were 298 women ranging from 18 to 77 years of age, who were living in Malpaisillo-Larreynaga at the time of data collection. Half of the women \( (n = 149) \) had participated in workshops facilitated by Xochilt Acalt, and the other half \( (n = 149) \) were women residing in nearby communities, but where Xochilt Acalt was not active. Xochilt Acalt participants were identified and randomly selected to be interviewed from a list of all women who had participated in the organization’s education and/or civic participation workshops \( (N = 626) \).

The 149 women in the non-Xochilt Acalt comparison sample came from five communities that neighbored Malpaisillo-Larreynaga where there were similar levels of poverty and access to education, but where Xochilt Acalt did not currently offer participation. Women residing in communities where Xochilt Acalt hosted workshops, but who had not participated, were not selected for the comparison group because merely living in close proximity to the organization, and regularly
interacting with participating members, could have exposed women to the values, resources, and mission of the organization. Participants in the five comparison communities were identified using systematic sampling procedures for remote rural areas were employed with the assistance of community leaders (see Grabe, 2010, for more detail).

Demographic statistics broken down by participation in Xochilt Acalt are presented in Table 1. Participants’ average age was approximately 40 and about three-quarters were in partnered relationships. The majority had three or more children and most had completed at least some formal schooling (87.2%) and were literate (87.8%). Additionally, about one-third of women were employed outside the home. The two groups did not differ in demographic characteristics; thus, these variables were not included as covariates in subsequent analyses.

### Procedure

Participants were interviewed by five trained female interviewers (de Jong, 2016) who were local to Nicaragua, native Spanish speakers, and residents of the capital city, Managua, located approximately 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Malpaísillo. The geographic distance in residence between the interviewer and interviewee was intended to support 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 from Nicaragua.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Xochilt participants (n = 149)</th>
<th>Comparison participants (n = 149)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (M, SD)</td>
<td>40.56 (14.06)</td>
<td>39.97 (13.37)</td>
<td>.317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship status</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ex., partnered)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age difference between</td>
<td>4.87 (6.23)</td>
<td>4.5 (8.41)</td>
<td>.719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman and her partner (M, SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children (M, SD)</td>
<td>3.16 (2.03)</td>
<td>3.5 (2.48)</td>
<td>.404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed primary</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed secondary</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional schooling (e.g., technical or university)</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy (%) literate</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>.288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed outside the home (%)</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>.230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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. The interviewers also explained that they were working with researchers from a university in the United States who were not formally associated with Xochilt Acalt. Once a woman agreed to participate, the interviewers read the informed consent which explained that responses would be kept confidential, names would not be attached to responses, and that only an aggregate of responses would be disseminated. Interviews were conducted in private spaces in the interviewees’ homes and lasted between 35 minutes and 1 hour.

Measures

Survey items were translated into Spanish, their meaning evaluated in partnership with the research team to ensure relevance in the specific location, and then back-translated to check that the meanings were properly conveyed. 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 be asked dichotomously (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; Grabe, 2010).

Demographic information. Sociodemographic items included questions about women’s age, number of children, education level, occupation, earnings, employment status, and relationship status.

Organizational participation. Participants were asked whether or not they had participated in the organization Xochilt Acalt. Organizational participation was coded as (1) if the woman had participated in any Xochilt workshops and (0) if she had not.

Self-esteem. The 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to assess participants’ sense of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). Sample items included whether or not participants agreed or disagreed with items such as “At times, I think I am no good at all,” and “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.” Mean scores were calculated, and higher scores reflected higher levels of self-esteem. Internal consistency was 0.69.

Sense of powerlessness. Four items selected from Neal and Groat’s (1974) powerlessness scale were used to measure individuals’ beliefs that it is possible to change political structures in society. These items were selected based on relevance to a sense of powerlessness in sociopolitical matters. Mean scores were calculated. Lower scores reflect a lesser sense of powerlessness. Sample items included whether women agreed or disagreed with items such as “The average
citizen can have an influence on government decisions,” and “It is only an illusion to believe that one can really influence what happens in society at large.” Internal consistency was 0.60.

Reproductive decision-making. Respondents completed a reproductive decision-making scale designed by the International Center for Research on Women (2006). Women reported whether her partner (coded as 1), both she and her partner equally (coded as 2), or she (coded as 3) made the final decision on four items of reproductive health. Examples included, “use of contraception” and “to have or not have sex.” Responses to the four items were summed with higher scores reflecting more autonomy in decision-making for the respondent. Internal consistency was 0.63.

Educational aspiration. Three items were used to assess ambition and desire to complete additional formal education. These included “If you had the means, is going to university something that you would like to do?,” “Have you taken steps to further your education?,” and a reverse coded item, “Would you be satisfied if you did not complete any more schooling?” A sum of affirmative answers was taken as an index of educational aspiration. Because this scale was conceptualized as a manifest count score, internal consistency was not assessed.

Analytic Strategy

First, group difference tests were conducted on all demographic variables based upon whether or not women had participated in Xochilt Acalt, to both contextualize participants and identify potential covariates. Next, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine mean differences among the variables of interest, based upon participation in Xochilt Acalt. We then used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test a hypothesized model linking organizational participation to greater involvement in reproductive decision-making, and higher levels of educational aspiration, via levels of self-esteem and sense of powerlessness. The model was estimated using AMOS 4.0 structural equation modeling software (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1999). Bootstrapping analyses were used to test for mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008). Alternative models were also tested.

Results

Group Differences

A multivariate analysis of variance test was run to compare differences between Xochilt Acalt participants and nonparticipants across all variables of
Table 2. Mean Process Values and Outcomes by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process variables</th>
<th>Xochilt Acalt participants</th>
<th>Comparison Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 149 M (SD)</td>
<td>n = 149, M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>0.85 (.14)</td>
<td>0.80 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of powerlessness</td>
<td>0.36 (.20)</td>
<td>0.43 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproductive decision-making</td>
<td>6.36 (1.98)</td>
<td>5.50 (1.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational aspiration</td>
<td>1.75 (.98)</td>
<td>1.51 (.93)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Effect sizes (d) were calculated as the difference between group means divided by the standardized deviation (d = [M1 – M2/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.

interest: self-esteem, sense of powerlessness, reproductive decision-making, and educational aspiration. The omnibus test was significant, F(4, 293) = 7.82 p < .000. As can be seen in Table 2, participants and nonparticipants significantly differed on all of the variables in the expected direction. Women who were participants of Xochilt Acalt reported higher levels of self-esteem, lower sense of powerlessness, a greater voice in reproductive decision-making, and higher levels of educational aspiration.

Testing a Model of Reproductive Justice

As described in the introduction, we hypothesized that participation in Xochilt Acalt would be linked to greater involvement in reproductive decision-making via self-esteem and to higher levels of educational aspiration via a reduced sense of powerlessness. Multiple fit indices were used as guides to evaluate goodness-of-fit model fit: Chi square goodness-of-fit statistics, the normed fit index (NFI; Bentler & Bonett, 1980), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA). A satisfactory fit is indicated by a nonsignificant chi-square or a chi-square lower than double the degrees of freedom, NFI and CFI values greater than .95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), and an RMSEA value lower than .08 (Steiger, 1990).

Model fit of the hypothesized path model suggest the model provided excellent fit to the data (i.e., x² = 1.88, df = 3, p = .60, NFI = .97, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00). As shown in Figure 1, involvement in Xochilt Acalt was related to having a greater role in reproductive decision-making, in part, due to the role of increased self-esteem. Additionally, involvement in Xochilt Acalt was related
to higher levels of educational aspiration via decreases in sense of powerlessness. Moreover, bootstrapping analyses with 5000 resamples were used to test for mediation, as recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Bootstrapping analyses demonstrated that increased levels of self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between participation in Xochilt Acalt and reproductive decision-making ($B = .12, 95\% CI [0.03, 0.28]$). More specifically, the relationship between organizational participation and the reproductive decision-making was reduced (from $B = .22, p < .000$), though remained significant (to $B = .18, p < .000$, as reflected in Figure 1) in the presence of the mediating variable indicating partial, rather than full, mediation. Results of the bootstrapping analysis also confirmed the mediating role of sense of powerlessness in the relation between participation in Xochilt Acalt and educational aspiration ($B = .04; 95\% CI = [0.01 to 0.11]$). In this case the relationship between organizational participation and educational aspiration became nonsignificant ($B = .07, p = .11$, as reflected in Figure 1, reduced from $B = .12, p = .047$) when controlling for sense of powerlessness, thus suggesting full mediation.

Finally, because it was plausible that both higher self-esteem and a decreased sense of powerlessness could arise as outcomes from having a greater role in reproductive decision-making and from developing higher levels of educational aspiration (rather than the other way around), alternative models were tested reversing the order of the data. This model did not provide adequate fit to the data (i.e., $x^2 = 14.97, df = 4, p < .000, NFI = .78, CFI = .81, RMSEA = .10$). Therefore the findings suggest that participation in Xochilt Acalt
is related to outcomes for women in areas related to human rights, namely greater involvement in reproductive decision-making and higher educational aspiration.

**Discussion**

As articulated in the introduction to this Special Issue, researchers must recognize that perceptions of rights related to women’s reproductive health are outcomes of women and girl’s interactions with others and with systems (Eaton & Stephens, 2020). Consistent with this understanding, the current study was designed within a reproductive justice framework to empirically examine whether a community-based organization that addressed gendered psychosocial processes could help in understanding factors that shape women’s reproductive health outcomes. The findings from the current study center women’s experience from the majority world, and uncover processes surrounding women’s reproductive decision-making and educational aspiration that, to our knowledge, have not yet been demonstrated. Specifically, our results yielded support for two primary processes: (1) we found that organizational participation was associated with women’s increased ability to voice their concerns and actualize their desires in matters related to reproductive decision-making with their partners, due, in part, to its relation to self-esteem, and (2) organizational participation was also positively associated with educational aspiration, in part, due to its relation to a lower sense of powerlessness among women.

Moreover, the two outcomes of interest—reproductive decision-making and educational aspiration—were also linked to each other. This finding in and of itself is not surprising. According to analyses of data from demographic and health surveys in nine Latin American countries, women’s education levels are a significant predictor of family size, with no education being linked to large family sizes (e.g., six to seven children) and higher levels of women’s education predicting smaller families (e.g., two to three children; Martin & Juarez, 1995). Given the history and persistence of gendered oppression worldwide, findings that illuminate pathways toward improving equity in matters related to reproductive rights and educational aspiration for women are of critical importance.

The findings from this research may be valuable to both psychology researchers and groups seeking to enhance social justice and uphold values of equity and community well-being. In seeking to promote research that contributes to change, researchers within psychology have encouraged an analysis that goes beyond demonstrating group differences that reflect inequity by shifting the focus to processes that might disrupt their continuation (Dutt & Grabe, 2019; Grabe, 2016a, b, c). Similarly, interdisciplinary scholars have written about methodologies that can expose resistance to and rethinking of social structures by investigating individuals who have developed an oppositional ideology and are engaged in
resisting social structures (Sandoval, 2000). Centering the experiences of women in the majority world who were participating in a community-led organization was an opportunity to rethink conventional research practices, thereby identifying pathways that can contribute knowledge to the psychological processes associated with reproductive decision-making and educational aspiration. In particular, the findings from the current study underscore the value of grassroots empowerment opportunities for women to understand their human rights as they relate to systematic inequities, power dynamics, and social-structural contexts.

Although not having more specific detail on the workshops as an intervention is a limitation, we found that participating in an organizational setting that explicitly conveyed knowledge about women’s human rights was positively related to processes that related to the actualization of women’s rights. Thus, while the particular participation or outcomes assessed in any given study will certainly vary upon sociocultural context and where such community-based work is happening, the findings have strong implications in the fight for women’s rights worldwide. As Geraldine Moane (1999) suggested, psychological research aimed at change “aims to facilitate breaking out of oppression by identifying processes and practices which can transform the psychological patterns associated with oppression and facilitate taking action to bring about change in social conditions” (p. 180). Our findings demonstrated that women who are organizational participants report psychological patterns—higher self-esteem and lowered sense of powerlessness—that are associated with enhanced social conditions—greater reproductive decision-making and lowered sense of powerlessness.

In addition to research implications, the findings also lend evidence to the importance of community-based organizations, and communities of women, challenging structural oppressions in a manner that reduces oppressive contexts and results in outcomes related to reproductive justice. The organization, in their effort to transform traditional power structures—provided an important and effective means to achieving change. Of note, although we had data on the number and type of workshops women attended, the predictor of the outcomes was simply whether or not women had participated in the organization. This finding may demonstrate the importance of empowering “settings,” rather than specific curriculums, that serve to increase women’s awareness of their rights and provide space for discussion and support during a consciousness-raising process (Dutt, 2018). Demonstrating the importance of the organization suggests that changing laws alone is not enough to bring about significant social change, and that organizational participation may influence gendered psychosocial processes related to rights violations. Although a discourse of human rights is not a widely used perspective among psychologists, these results suggest that knowledge of rights situated in structural understandings may be an important variable in the interruption of psychosocial processes related to inequity and is potentially a fundamental requirement of social justice. Importantly, the organization of focus in the current study was developed
by women familiar with the unique experiences and specific barriers faced by women in this particular community. Consequently, future organizational interventions seeking to enhance women’s rights should follow a similar model so as to address the needs and desires of women in a contextually responsible manner.

Eaton and Stephens (2020) also note that, “centering the empowerment of those facing the greatest barriers to reproductive freedom requires a shift from traditional ways of thinking about research.” A majority of scholarship and intervention aimed at marginalized women utilizes a “rescue narrative” by intending to rectify injustice experienced by women who are presumably unable to confront without outside help (Alexander, 2005; Cornwall, 2016). In recent decades international agencies have also coopted and depoliticized the concept of empowerment that was once used by progressive social movements to facilitate a struggle for social justice and apply it instead to the context of broad-based neoliberal development strategies that, in many cases, obscures or exacerbates the structural conditions in which women live their lives (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Perkins, 1995). The results from this study underscore the importance of women with less structural power taking action within their social contexts to improve the social conditions in which they live their lives. Moreover, because the topic and research questions were guided by local women working in areas of change, the results—and what we can discern from them—represent a coconstruction of knowledge (Lykes, 1997; Riessman, 2005). Taking a nontraditional approach within the discipline has the potential for far-reaching influence, both within academia and women’s lives.

**Limitations**

Although the quasi-experimental nature of the study design allowed for cross-group comparisons, the lack of random assignment and longitudinal design limit the conclusiveness of the study findings. For example, it is possible that levels of self-esteem and sense of powerlessness are impacted by high levels of women’s decision-making power and aspiration, rather than the other way around. Alternative models did not provide support for this, nor did qualitative data reported elsewhere (Dutt, 2016). Despite the fact that there are always limitations in cross-sectional data, the results from this study lend evidence for the theoretical model. Only a randomly assigned study design, and longitudinal analyses, could more confidently answer these questions. However, such designs raise ethical issues in field research investigating processes surrounding women’s rights.

Another potential limitation to our study arises from the insufficient availability of high-quality measures to assess constructs in nontraditional research settings. For example, a standardized scale of educational aspiration for adult women in impoverished rural areas does not exist. As such, we piloted several questions that led to striking results, but we would encourage future researchers
interested in this topic to consider creating a standardized scale of educational aspiration. Moreover, the low internal consistencies reported for several scales raises questions about adequacy of the scales. However, the scales had strong face and construct validity in this sample and the demonstrated relations were as predicted. Nevertheless, future research should aim to construct measures that will more accurately capture the study variables.

Finally, although this study focused on the decisions and aspirations made by women, the aim was not to suggest that the responsibility to improve women’s lives rests solely on the backs of women. Women should not be responsible for undoing, at an individual level, their own oppression. Nevertheless, because psychologists argue that wellness must come, in part, from one’s own sense of capacity to address oppression, the importance of interrupting the psychosocial processes surrounding women’s rights at large should not be understated (Prilleltensky, 2008). The organization evaluated in the present study provided an example of how, at a community level, women can be supported in seeking changes that reduce their marginalization and increase their capacity to have greater agency in reproductive and educational outcomes. Future work should consider interventions and research that explore these mechanisms among male partners and examine the impact this has on women’s experiences.

Conclusion

In sum, employing a reproductive justice framework allowed us to underscore that shifting from traditional ways of conducting research by centering those facing the greatest barriers to reproductive freedom reveals a coproduction of knowledge that to which we would not otherwise have access. This approach revealed that if we are to make serious attempts at shifting women’s reproductive justice worldwide, opportunities for women to gain access to knowledge that holds the potential to interrupt sociocultural norms related to power dynamics is necessary.

References

Reproductive Justice


Reproductive Justice


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