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An assessment of the association between asset ownership and intimate partner violence in Pakistan



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study assessed the association between women's reports of asset ownership (home and land) and experience of three types of intimate partner violence (IPV): physical violence, emotional violence, and husbands' controlling behaviors.

Study design: Population-based secondary analysis.

Method: This cross-sectional study used data from a sub-sample of 658 women from the nationally representative Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2012–13. Logistic regression analyses were used to estimate the association between asset ownership and IPV.

Results: Results from logistic regressions indicated that when women owned assets their husbands were 2.3 times more likely to use controlling tactics ($P < 0.001$) which was mitigated only when women had a say in household decisions. Physical or emotional violence, however, was not significantly associated with women's asset ownership.

Conclusion: The study findings highlight the importance of culture and context in policy implementation.

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Introduction

Recent reports from the World Bank indicate that increasing women's asset ownership in developing countries is a key element of successfully achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Number 5 to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'.¹ This is one of 17 goals that build on the Millennium Development Goals to end poverty including extremely poverty by 2030 by focusing on 'people, planet, and prosperity'.² This is in line with recommendations from the WHO Commission on Social

Determinants of Health that espoused the idea that solutions to global health inequity must be social if the determinants of inequity are social to begin with.³

Extant literature supports the notion that structural interventions such as asset ownership may be an important positive factor for women. For example, Muchomba et al.⁴ found that asset ownership among women reduces their need for survival sex which in turn has positive health ramifications such as reduced risk for HIV, joining Agarwal (1994) in suggesting that asset ownership is an important way to address gender inequity in health. However, research has also

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found that women's asset ownership may contribute to gender inequity by increasing the incidence of intimate partner violence against them.⁵ These contradictory findings point to the importance of context-specific policies in the promotion of women's asset ownership as an intervention to reduce intimate partner violence. Indeed, previous applications of 'one size fits all' policies in countries that are seemingly similar in culture, for example countries in South Asia and Africa, have had unfortunate and counterproductive effects.⁶ The brunt of the ill-effects of such policies is often borne by women⁷ countering the development goals of the same institutions that advocate for such policies.⁸

In an attempt to account for context and culture, the present study examines the association between asset ownership and intimate partner violence among women in Pakistan, a country that is well positioned to see a push for asset ownership among women given the presence of various NGOs, women's organizations, and international bodies that aim to enhance gender equality in the country. While asset ownership for women is an important goal in itself, this study is grounded in the assumption that it is important to understand the potential unintended consequences of such a policy for the population that it intends to benefit.

In addition, the present study examines whether household decision-making power, coupled with asset ownership, reduces women's chances of experiencing intimate partner violence, given that previous studies have found household decision-making power to be negatively associated with lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence.⁹

Assets and intimate partner violence

The literature provides mixed evidence regarding the association between women's asset ownership and their experience of intimate partner violence. One previous study found women's asset ownership to have negative consequences in terms of intimate partner violence,¹⁰ whereas most other studies that have examined the association between asset ownership and intimate partner violence found that intimate partner violence reduces when women own assets such as property or land.^{10–12} This is because, scholars indicate, effective asset ownership is not simply an indicator of economic status but social status, prestige, and even political power.¹² This necessitates that gender disparity in asset ownership is indicative of overarching gender inequality, which, in turn, makes asset ownership among women a public health issue given the disparity in health outcomes based on gender in South Asia.¹²

Women in Pakistan

In Pakistan, formally known as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, gender is structured by patriarchal and religious norms echoed in deep structural inequality. Together, these cultural factors create a subordinate position for women in both the household and society at large.^{13,14} Pakistan is not homogeneous, being home to multiple tribal societies, but the status of women is subordinate to that of men in all such tribes. As a result of this cultural context, very few resources are invested in women's development. Girls' education, for

example, is valued less than boys' education¹⁵ with only half the number of schools available for girls as for boys and a resulting literacy rate among girls of 12%–26%.¹⁶

As is common in patriarchal faith-based societies, cultural norms in Pakistan place a high value on family honor and traditional gender roles that, in turn, place women's sexuality and freedom at the core of men's subordination of women.¹⁷ Women's subordination is achieved through systematic violence against women and a culture of fear inculcated through a complex web of socio-political and economic structures in both public and private spaces.¹³ Any affront to men's position of power, for example through employment and income-generating activities by women, may be met with violence both at home and on the streets.^{13,18} At the same time, women's limited employment opportunities and lack of access to inheritance and income prevents them from leaving violent relationships. In the event that they do leave, they risk threatening their family honor which puts them at risk of violence from other family members.¹⁸ In a country where marriages are often arranged by families, family honor is at risk when women assert themselves, even if it is for personal safety.¹⁴

A large number of international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operate in Pakistan to address gender inequality. Their work has met with some success; in 2006 the Women's Protect Act amended a previous law, the *Hudood Ordinance*, that criminalized sex outside of marriage. However, much work is yet to be done to repeal the law and promote gender-sensitive norms on a national level.¹⁴

Land ownership structure in Pakistan

Civil law in Pakistan provides both men and women with the right to hold, acquire, transfer, sell, and dispose of property. However, women are precluded from the right to property acquired during marriage because co-ownership of marital property is not allowed.¹⁵ In addition, inheritance laws, based on Muslim Personal Laws, are discriminatory toward women, who are eligible to inherit only half of what men can. Exceptions can be made via dowry, gifts, and wills, but these are not very common.¹⁵

Household decision-making power

Women's household decision-making power is associated with their ability to assert themselves, which in turn is linked to their own and their children's well-being,^{16,19} including in terms of women's experience of intimate partner violence.⁹ Scholars argue that women's household decision-making power can be enhanced through changes in laws and socio-cultural norms, as well as through economic interventions.^{12,16,20} Measurement of household decision-making power has proved to be challenging, as it is a phenomenon that is difficult to define in concrete terms. Some scholars have constructed questionnaires to gauge women's decision-making power in multiple spheres or domains:¹⁶ purchases of food, clothing, education, health, durable goods, use of contraception, and so on. Others have used women's ownership of assets as a measure of women's status and associated decision-making power.²¹ In the present

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