Do women-only public works programs advance women’s empowerment?

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Intervention and RCT

- Women-only public works program in Lao PRD with triple objective:
  - Road maintenance
  - Income support to poor households
  - Women’s empowerment

- As interest exceeded available slots, a lottery was carried out among interested and eligible households
Timeline

Randomization
[May, Jun 2018]

Baseline data collection
[Sep 2018]

Road Maintenance Groups active
[Jun 2018-Dec 2019]

Endline data collection
[Dec 2019-Feb 2020]

Analysis
[Mar, Apr 2020]
RMG program increased women’s work and earnings...

Women's productive work

Women's Earnings

Regular Earner

Average Monthly Earnings

Total Monthly Earnings

RMG
Control

RMG
Control
...women’s work drove up household incomes
Did the RMG program increase women’s empowerment?

Potential channels:

• Greater bargaining power due to earned income?

• Exposure to other more empowered women?

• Recognition by the community?
Changes in empowerment measured through decision-making

Measures of participation in household decision-making

Different scales (z-score for index, fraction and count for remaining)

- DM Index
- Is Final DM
- Frac. of Decisions is a DM
- Final DM on Decision She Cares About
- Frac of Decisions She Cares About is DM
- Believes She Should be DM
- Frac of Decisions Believes Should be DM

RMG  Control
Changes in empowerment measured through voice in the community

Voice in community

- Comfortable Raising Hand
- Comfortable speaking up to ensure payment of wages
- Comfortable Criticizing Authority

RMG vs Control
No changes in the likelihood of GBV
Do social norms mediate the impacts of the RMG program on women’s empowerment?
Program for women or for the households?

I: And you called your husband to help out?
P: Yes
I: And what about others? Did they call their husband to help out?
P: Yes, all 3 of us called

I: You said there is a man who helped, who's husbands?
P: The men are husbands.
I: Did only husbands work but no women?
P: If the wife got tired, husbands helped
I: Did all husbands go to help except your husband?
P: Yes.

I: Do you help her with the road maintenance work?
P: Yes, I do.
I: Do you go to the roam maintenance work together or on a specific day you go to help her?
P: As I mentioned before, if my wife goes, I don’t go. Others are the same, if husbands go, wives don’t go.
Social norms justify sharing work and earnings

- Too strenuous for women
- Men have more energy and strength
- Women need to perform “their” chores (traditional women’s duties such as attending to paddy)

Consequently, the earnings from RMGs were treated as “household earnings”
Potential design changes to strengthen impacts of the program?

- Access to accounts and training? (Field et al., 2021)
- Behavior Change Communication? (Roy et al., 2019)
Thank you!