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Title: How Do Perceptions of Relative Poverty Influence Women's Empowerment? Evidence from Papua New Guinea



How does the experience of feeling relatively poor and disadvantaged affect gender attitudes, including support for women's economic participation and their empowerment with respect to decision-making in their community and home? Causal evidence on the effects of economic prosperity on women's empowerment is scarce, and we know of no evidence on the impacts of inequality and feelings of relative deprivation. This question constitutes an especially important knowledge gap given that world wide, income inequality within developing countries is on the rise (Ravallion 2014). Since attitudes towards women's roles in society ultimately shape women's opportunities to engage politically and economically, this trend has broad societal implications.

We explore this question by leveraging an experiment conducted with female and male adults in 900 households in Papua New Guinea. We employ an established survey treatment to subtly alter a respondent's perception of their relative well-being. Specifically, respondents were asked one of two household income questions, such that half of respondents were primed to feel relatively poor and the other half were primed to feel neutrally or positively about their household's income. Those who feel relatively poor may have negative outlooks and invest less in the future. If individuals who feel relatively poor are also less likely to support women's advancement and/or empowerment, this is an additional cost of poverty and inequality. We find that those who feel relatively poor are significantly more likely to support women engaging in paid employment and girls building their human capital, which suggests that relative economic insecurity can actually prompt support for women's economic advancement. However, this support is not accompanied by greater support for women's bargaining power within the household or their involvement in civic life. In other words, increased support for women's economic participation appears to stem mainly from a desire to raise household income.