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U.S. PRESIDENT'S MALARIA INITIATIVE

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U.S. President's Malaria Initiative

Empowering Women in Malaria Prevention

One of the primary control measures for malaria is indoor residual spraying (IRS). Historically, few women have been employed in IRS programs. The President's Malaria Initiative (PMI) VectorLink Project continues the work of the PMI Africa Indoor Residual Spraying (AIRS) Project, implementing the largest vector control project globally and protecting millions of people from malaria across sub-Saharan Africa. The project's work benefits pregnant women and children, as they are most vulnerable to contracting malaria. In addition, the project actively promotes gender equality and female empowerment at all levels of its operations. The project worked with key stakeholders to identify barriers to women's participation in IRS and implemented a series of operational policies to address these barriers. Using routine programmatic data, the project actively monitors and reports against gender-related goals. Results show that including women more fully in IRS results in improved vector control outcomes while also advancing women's economic empowerment.

Ensuring a Hospitable Work Environment

To attract and retain female employees, the PMI VectorLink Project adapted the physical work environment to ensure privacy for women. The PMI VectorLink Project ensures that every operational site has separate changing areas, separate bathrooms with trashcans, and separate shower areas for men and women as spray operators must change and shower after spraying to minimize the risk of insecticide contamination. To further enhance privacy, the women's showers are designed with walls that reach the ground and are high enough to ensure complete privacy. Showers have proper drainage so that others cannot see the residual water, which women requested due to sensitivity around menstruation. Spray campaigns do not begin unless operational sites are verified as meeting these and other environmental compliance standards.



Sexual harassment is not tolerated, and all workers, both temporary and full-time staff, can anonymously report any misconduct. Sexual harassment guidelines, with a phone number to call to report any misconduct, are posted in a local language at each operational site. The project has incorporated gender and sexual harassment content into trainings given to government partners, supervisors, and seasonal employees. Workers sign a freedom from harassment policy at the time they sign their employment contract.

To accommodate traditional norms that might prevent women from working all day alone with men to whom they are not related, the project instituted a buddy system for female spray operators. If there are women on a spray team, there must be at least two women on the team.

Supporting Professional Advancement during the Childbearing Years

The PMI VectorLink Project is committed to providing jobs to qualified staff, regardless of their gender. With spray campaigns happening annually in many of the project's countries, work on PMI VectorLink can provide opportunities for professional

growth as returning workers take on increasing levels of responsibility. To date, PMI VectorLink has trained more than 15,228 women to support indoor residual spraying. The percentage of women trained by the project continues to increase; in the first year of programming, 27 percent of people trained were female, increasing to 29 percent in the second year. The project is working with the National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) in each country to recruit and hire more women, ensuring a sustainable approach to gender-integrated IRS after the project ends.

Exposure to insecticides for IRS is not safe for pregnant or lactating women. The PMI VectorLink Project is committed to upholding safety standards, while also attracting and retaining female talent. All female seasonal workers take a pregnancy test every 30 days during the spray campaign. Results are delivered in private. Any woman who has signed a contract and then is found pregnant is guaranteed a position on the Project at her initial wages. Depending on her role, the teams find other positions, such as data verification assistants or mobilizers, for the pregnant worker. The objective is to retain and promote qualified women, while allowing professional growth and income generation during a pregnancy.

The project focuses on identifying women with potential for supervisory positions. These women receive mentorship and training and many return to work as team leaders or supervisors in the following year. In 2012, only 15% of supervisors were women. In 2018, over 2220 female supervisors were hired. In the same year, in seven of the project-supported countries, the percentage of women supervisors was higher than 30 percent.

The project's approaches have led to increased hiring of women and a dramatic increase in the number of women in supervisory roles, all while meeting or exceeding the project's IRS targets. The project also contributes to the global dialogue through peer-reviewed journal articles, conferences, and participation in discussion panels, such as the Accelerate to Equal Initiative, which strives to understand and overcome the barriers to women's engagement in public health efforts.

Through joint working meetings and IRS boot camp training, the project's gender integration has inspired the Global Fund IRS implementing organization in Ghana, AGAMal, to begin engaging women in its field operations for the first time since its inception in 2006.

Mobile Payments Increase Women's Economic Power

In 2015, the PMI AIRS Project implemented a mobile banking system in Zambia for its seasonal workers, providing risk-free, safe and reliable payments. Facilitated by a mobile network operator, seasonal workers were able to access their money through a mobile phone SIM card. Mobile payments are helping to increase financial options and decision-making authority for workers, particularly women. With direct access to electronic funds, women now have more control over their money, allowing for independent financial planning, saving, and purchasing as the recipients can use the phones to manage their financial accounts including money deposits, transfers, and cash out.

Before working as a spray operator, Filumba Beauty was working as a volunteer counselor and had no income. Since she started working for the PMI AIRS Project three years ago, she has been promoted from spray operator to Team Leader. The money she's earned has enabled her to build a house for her and her three children and is helping to pay for her son's third year of teaching school. Beauty said, however, that she was having difficulty saving money and getting her son the money when he needed it.

"When you have cash and no bank account, it's hard to save," said Beauty. "You just use the money. I would see things and buy them. Now I don't do that. It's easy to send my son money with the mobile phone when he needs it," she added.



IRS Team Leader Filumba Beauty and her son Richard at the house she built with her income from working on the project.

The PMI VectorLink Project is funded by the U.S. President's Malaria Initiative and implemented by Abt Associates. The project's period of performance is from September 2017 to September 2022. For more information: www.pmi.gov; www.pmivectorlink.org