

SECTOR Note

Gender and construction in South Asia

In most countries construction work is undertaken almost exclusively by men. However, in the countries of south Asia, women play an important role.



While official data in India indicate only a small proportion (around 8%) of construction workers are women, any visit to a building site will reveal that women actually constitute around 30-40% of the total workforce. Often they work as part of a family unit, in which case they are not on the payroll of the contractor and may not receive any payment at all for their work, wages being paid instead to the husband. In this situation, women are to all intents and purposes 'invisible'. It is therefore not surprising to find that there are no separate facilities provided for them or for their children.

Even when the presence of women on construction sites is recognized and their work is compensated, they are only allowed to undertake unskilled tasks for low pay. Access to training and skilled work is denied them. Moreover, they are generally paid less than men undertaking similar tasks.

Trade unions and some NGOs in India are working hard to organize women construction workers. Some are providing child care facilities (crèches) and schools for their children. Others are providing training or social security options. An initiative in another part of the developing world is the Regional Women in Construction Project, supported by Practical Action Southern Africa. In industrialized countries there are more cases of employment opportunities as well as organizations supporting women in construction.

