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Reducing VAWG in Construction

Tags: VAWG, WEE, Construction, Jobs, Case Study

Creating safe and inclusive environments is a top priority for UK government, who have signed up to several international commitments in this area, including Sustainable Development Goal 11 to 'make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable', with a target that directly contributes to addressing women and girls' safety in public spaces.

Violence and the threat of violence holds back economic growth in urban areas, limiting women's mobility, access to economic opportunities, and the ability to move into higher paid or more secure jobs. The cost of violence against women ranges from 1.4% to 3.7% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), according to recent costing studies within developing country contexts.

Risks of violence against women and girls and construction

Women construction workers are vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse, exacerbated by the traditionally male working environment. For example, female construction workers in Sylhet city, Bangladesh have described being economically exploited, verbally abused, and sexually harassed, mostly by co-workers or construction supervisors.¹

Large construction projects which involve an influx of predominantly male workers into a community area can expose women and girls living in the community and providing services (e.g. traders, sex workers) to risks of sexual exploitation and violence.²

Sex work and increased use of drugs and alcohol are often associated with a mobile and temporary workforce, such as truckers and construction workers, which can further exacerbate the risk of VAWG.³

Modern slavery and human trafficking is a significant global problem for the construction sector, with high profile cases of both men, women and children trafficked during large infrastructure projects and to work in the construction industry (e.g. construction associated with the 2022 football World Cup).⁴

What are the key opportunities and promising practice?

Ensuring social safeguards are in place to mitigate and address risks, including sexual harassment policies, Environmental & Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) procedures, reporting frameworks and robust grievance mechanisms to strengthen the duty of care across a range of actors, including the funding agency, national government, line ministry, contractor(s) and other relevant stakeholders. There should be proper implementation and monitoring of social safeguards through contracts, M&E plans, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes, and compliance auditing. Reporting mechanisms, including HR management procedures, should allow workers and local community members to report incidences of violence or harassment without fear of reprisal.⁵ These incidences should be fully investigated and disciplinary action taken, where appropriate.

However, it is important to note that there are significant complexities with regard to a contractor's responsibility for its workers' behaviour, and associated duty of care for affected communities, outside working hours.⁶ Training on VAWG for the construction workforce (including HR and management, as well as construction workers) can be useful as a preventative and awareness-raising strategy.

¹ Choudhury (2013). For example, one female construction worker said, "It becomes more problematic for us when the main men [raj mistry] want to make sexual advances. Since their work is very important, neither sardars nor contractors say anything to them." (p.893)

² World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim (October 2016) in [speech](#) launching GGBV Task Force

³ USAID (2015); Gardsbane (2008)

⁴ Human Rights Watch (2014)

⁵ USAID (2015)

⁶ Personal communication, Ian Curtis (24 March 2017)

Since 2016, the ICED programme has been working with DFID Uganda to help strengthen its capacity and oversight of safeguards on its infrastructure programmes, particularly those that are implemented through third parties and delivery partners (see box). The support is set within a wider context of serious GBV and child protection breaches on a World Bank roads programmes in Uganda, which contributed to the World Bank cancelling the funding to the Uganda Transport Sector Development Project in 2015.⁷

Ensuring a safe working environment for women construction workers, free from harassment and fear of violence. For example, CARE's EU-funded project 'Labour Rights for Female Construction Workers' (2016-2018)⁸ aims to address challenges faced by women working in Cambodia's construction industry. An estimated 20–40% of construction workers in Phnom Penh are female; many have relocated from rural areas of Cambodia to find work and face low pay, security and threats from male construction workers. Project activities include capacity building of female peer leaders, creation of Technical Working Groups on worker rights, and capacity building of 300 private sector employers in the construction sector.

Case study: DFID Uganda's Safeguard Action Plan for infrastructure programming

In November 2016, DFID Uganda approached the ICED Facility to support the preparation of an office-wide Safeguards Action Plan to strengthen DFID Uganda's risk management approach and oversight capacity on safeguards, specifically for infrastructure programmes delivered through partners such as the Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA), African Development Bank (AfDB) and TradeMark East Africa (TMEA).

During this work, it was agreed that under a second phase of support, ICED would assist DFID Uganda not only to implement the Safeguards Action Plan, but also influence and enhance collaboration with partners, and share learning with wider DFID country offices. Whereas Phase I focused primarily on social safeguards, Phase II includes both Social and Environmental Safeguards for infrastructure projects and draws upon more sector and country specific expertise within the ICED Facility.

In addition, the Phase II work includes the **design of a new programme to raise ambition and further address child exploitation and GBV on road construction programmes**. The new programme will consist of a TA component to the Government of Uganda's Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and a fund providing grant support to NGOs and CSOs working on GBV/child protection in the areas where major road construction is taking place. This work demonstrates DFID's commitment and ambition on tackling GBV and child protection on infrastructure programmes, and forms part of the DFID-wide increased interest in rigorous risk management and safeguards as DFID moves to expanding the portfolio on infrastructure and economic development.

Fair recruitment and building in an anti-trafficking prevention component can help reduce vulnerability to trafficking, sexual exploitation, and violence during construction. The UK's (2015) Modern Slavery Act and the appointment of an Independent Modern Slavery Commissioner provides provisions dealing with support and protection for victims, and increases the power of law enforcement surrounding slavery and trafficking. DFID/ILO's Work in Freedom Programme takes an integrated and holistic approach to prevent human trafficking and associated violence against women and girls in South Asia.⁹

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has also supported a range of anti-trafficking awareness raising and vulnerability reduction components in their construction projects. For example, a social assessment as part of the ADB's Road Connectivity Sector Project in Nepal identified girls and women of the age groups 11-25 years old and boys of 6-12 years old as groups at risk to human trafficking for labour or sex work. An anti-trafficking component was therefore built into the project to raise awareness of trafficking amongst road construction workers, transport operators, female sex workers, labor migrants, and populations living along the road corridors.¹⁰

Social norm change targeted at construction workers There is also potential to prevent VAWG through workplace programmes aimed at changing harmful social norms, although to date there have been few interventions in the construction industry. One example is the preventative health programme 'Men at Work'

⁷ Serious allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse by contractor staff, including many cases of child sexual abuse and teenage pregnancies caused by road workers, sexual harassment of female employees, and an increased presence of sex workers, along with contractual breaches related to workers' issues, social and environmental concerns, poor project performance (World Bank, 2016). Although the World Bank cancelled the funding, GoU/UNRA continued with the project.

⁸ Project Profile: 'Labour Rights for Female Construction Workers' <http://www.care-cambodia.org/lrfcw>

⁹ The Work in Freedom programme focuses on to prevent trafficking of women and girls in South Asian countries of origin (Bangladesh, India and Nepal) and in selected destination countries (India, Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates).

¹⁰ World Bank (2009)

in Australia, which involves group activities targeted at men in a range of industries, including construction. The programme provides a supportive environment for men to question their own attitudes, behaviour and use of violence, and thus instigate change.¹¹

Key reading: USAID (2015) [Building a Safer World: Toolkit for Integrating GBV Prevention and Response into USAID Energy and Infrastructure Projects](#)

The **World Bank's Global GBV Task Force** is currently developing a set of recommendations and strategies to identify threats and prevent and respond to violence in World Bank projects, including construction of large infrastructure projects (report due out mid-2017)

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¹¹ Victorian Community Council Against Violence (VCCAV) (2004)