

# Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) in the Construction Sector



## Why is addressing GBVH important in construction?

Construction, particularly of major infrastructure projects, can be a high-risk environment for GBVH affecting community members, workers and service users.

GBVH risks can intensify within local communities when there are large influxes of male workers from outside the area. Such workers often come without their families and have large disposable incomes relative to the local community, and can pose a risk in terms of sexual harassment, violence and exploitative transactional relationships. These risks are higher where workers come into close contact with the local community, for example on access routes or when living together in remote areas.

During the construction phase, workers are also vulnerable to various forms of harassment, exploitation and abuse, aggravated by traditionally-male working environments. For example, [research with female construction workers](#) in Sylhet, Bangladesh, found that sexual harassment and exploitation were common features of workplace life. This GBVH was committed mostly by coworkers or construction supervisors and was largely due to gendered stereotypes about the sexual availability of female construction workers.

Land acquisition that occurs during the construction phase also increases the risks of GBVH. Individuals who make decisions about resettlement and compensation can abuse this power to sexually exploit vulnerable

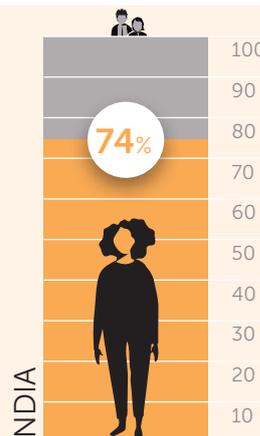
community members, such as those in female-headed households. This risk is exacerbated in places where women cannot legally hold land titles and are therefore more easily removed from their land.

## What are the benefits of addressing GBVH?

Addressing GBVH in the construction phase can have the following benefits:

- Improves workers' physical and emotional wellbeing and strengthens occupational health and safety (OHS). For example, [in the Philippines, sexual harassment and HIV/AIDS are recognised as OHS issues](#) by employers and are included in OHS training by the National Union of Building and Construction Workers.
- Avoids reputational damage, financial risks and legal liabilities for companies, investors and construction contractors. For example, in 2015, the [World Bank cancelled funding to the Uganda Transport Sector Development Project](#) after serious allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse by contractors.
- Builds relationships and social license to operate in communities. This can result from regular dialogue to understand and track project GBVH risks as well as the effective use of measures to prevent and respond to GBVH.
- Broadens the pool of potential workers that companies can draw upon, including women workers from nearby communities, because of lower perceived risk of GBVH.

India – [Research in Bhilai, India](#) found that one in three construction workers were women and they regularly experienced sexual harassment and exploitation from supervisors, contractors and site owners. Women who were heads of their household and had children were particularly at risk of sexual and economic exploitation. In India, stereotypes that women working in the sector are "sexually available" and "impure" can be reinforced by class and caste discrimination. As a result, women workers often face sexual harassment and innuendo, which can in turn provoke jealousy and violence from their male partners at home.



IN INDIA, 74% OF FEMALE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS REPORTED SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

Source: [Rai and Sarkar \(2012\)](#)



## What are the risk factors?

Risk factors that increase the potential for GBVH in construction include:

- Large-scale influx of transient male workers into small and often rural host communities with low capacity to absorb the sudden increase of workers.
- Remote locations where people have limited access to resources to report GBVH and receive support.
- Presence of security personnel, who can provide protection but can also abuse their positions of power and status to perpetrate GBVH.
- Male workers transporting goods (e.g. truck drivers), who can perpetrate GBVH on routes and at truck stops associated with the project, even if not on the project site.
- Poorly designed or maintained physical spaces on project sites and in worker accommodation. For example, bad lighting in and around grounds and access routes.

- Informal workers, whose informality means they may either be more vulnerable to GBVH due to lack of contracts or that potential perpetrators may go unidentified due to lack of background checks.
- Income-earning opportunities for women through direct employment in construction or operations, or indirect employment (e.g. catering, traders), which may also increase household tension and create community backlash against women in areas where the perception is that they should not work outside the home.

GBVH risks also vary depending on country-level or local factors such as how women are treated in society, legal and regulatory frameworks, and trust in local authorities to investigate reports (see accompanying note on Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector for further guidance on risk factors).

## What can investors and companies do?

	Examples of entry points	Case studies
 <p><b>Leadership and company culture</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appoint senior focal points in both clients and contractors with responsibility for ensuring that commitments and policies to prevent GBVH are implemented.</li> <li>• Increase women's representation, including at senior and decision-making levels in engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) companies.</li> <li>• Put in place monitoring systems at the highest levels for regular reporting on GBVH.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Bolivia:</b> The World Bank-funded <a href="#">Bolivia Santa Cruz Road Corridor Project</a> used a comprehensive approach to prevent and respond to any GBVH associated with the labour influx of approximately 2,000 workers (foreign and Bolivian) in the area. The contractor undertook regular training on the code of conduct for workers and set up a grievance mechanism, which included a specific mandate on GBVH. Economic empowerment programmes for local single women were provided as an economic alternative to prostitution. The project also arranged for an independent consultant to do a mapping of the capacity of local service providers to respond to cases of child abuse and GBVH.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Policies and procedures</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include requirements around GBVH in codes of conduct, policies and protocols for contractors, including training on policies and procedures once developed.</li> <li>• Ensure codes of conduct are publicly disclosed in local languages and are widely accessible to all workers and all groups of people in project areas.</li> <li>• Build GBVH risk assessments into key processes, including environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) and environmental and social management plans (ESMPs).</li> <li>• Ensure resettlement action plans (RAPs) take into account gender dynamics including GBVH risks at household and community level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Global:</b> As part of efforts to strengthen safeguards for GBVH on infrastructure projects, including during the construction phase, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) designed a <a href="#">safeguarding tool</a> to help DFID advisers and programme managers identify and mitigate sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment risks. The tool sets out how codes of conduct and policies can be used to prevent GBVH risks at key stages of the project, particularly when working through third-party suppliers and delivery partners. The tool also highlights how GBVH can be integrated into existing procedures to enable more effective GBVH prevention and response.</li> </ul>



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 <p><b>Grievance mechanisms and investigation procedures</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop confidential grievance reporting, referral and support systems for workers.</li> <li>• Establish safe, confidential and accessible grievance mechanisms for local communities.</li> <li>• Include options to report anonymously if preferred.</li> <li>• Consider engaging expertise to conduct mappings of formal services (healthcare, counselling) and informal resources (including through womens' organisations) to support those who have experienced GBVH.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mozambique:</b> The World Bank-funded <a href="#">Mozambique Integrated Feeder Road Development Project</a> identified sexual exploitation and abuse as a substantial risk during project preparation. As a result, the project created a survivor-centred grievance system with multiple entry points to raise and address allegations, including a project grievance mechanism, a toll-free number and a web-based reporting system. An NGO called Jhpiego acts as a third party monitor on mitigation measures and supports survivors through the reporting process. Grievance redress measures are taken in close coordination with local community organisations.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Recruitment and performance assessment</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess and revise HR policies, materials and training to encourage male and female applicants and improve female retention and promotion.</li> <li>• Ensure all workers have contracts and background checks including references from most recent employers.</li> <li>• Use robust recruitment processes to select, train, manage and monitor security companies and personnel.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Kazakhstan:</b> As part of the EBRD's support to the <a href="#">Big Almaty Ring Road (BAKAD)</a>, the Bank is providing technical assistance to help improve equal opportunities and ensure gender-responsive road development. The project will look at ways of improving female recruitment in BAKAD. It also includes a focus on preventing and responding to GBVH for women construction and road workers, and in local communities affected by the project.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Training and awareness raising</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver periodic mandatory training on GBVH to all workers, including contractors, subcontractors and core suppliers, as well as relevant consultants and clients.</li> <li>• Consider engaging expertise (e.g. from local women's rights organisations or NGOs working on GBVH) to conduct awareness campaigns to provide information to local communities, such as what is unacceptable behaviour and how to report an incident of GBVH.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Nepal:</b> A social assessment as part of the ADB's <a href="#">Road Connectivity Sector Project in Nepal</a> identified girls and women aged 11 to 25 years to be at risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation, and boys aged 6 to 12 to be at risk of trafficking for labour. The project provided awareness-raising activities on these topics with road construction workers, transport operators, women working in prostitution, labour migrants and populations living along the road corridors.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Work with contractors and suppliers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include assessment of gender and safety risks in bidding process for contractors.</li> <li>• Vet contractors for prior efforts to address GBVH through prevention and response.</li> <li>• Ensure contracts include clauses on GBVH (for example all workers and staff sign codes of conduct).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Nepal:</b> A UK-funded road maintenance programme <a href="#">Accelerating Investment and Infrastructure in Nepal (AIIN)</a> has been working with industry partners, including the Contractors' Association of Nepal, to address gender and GBVH in contracts. This has resulted in the successful adoption of a sub-clause that requires contractors to take preventive measures to address GBVH, including hiring an external expert if necessary.</li> </ul>



	Examples of entry points	Case studies
 <p><b>Physical design</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct safety audits to identify settings affected by the project that might increase the risk of GBVH. For example, if there is a new highway, consider whether adequate measures have been put in place to manage interaction points with communities such as truck stops.</li> <li>• Provide safe, secure and separate living spaces for male and female construction workers.</li> <li>• Provide lighting around project sites, including around latrines and access routes.</li> <li>• Install separate, lockable latrines for female construction workers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cambodia:</b> The EU-funded project <a href="#">Labour Rights for Female Construction Workers</a> aimed to address challenges faced by women working in the construction industry. Up to 40 per cent of construction workers in Phnom Penh are female, and many face security threats from male construction workers and in local communities. The project improved various aspects of physical design for the safety of women, including providing proper lighting on the way to latrines, separate toilets for men and women, and separate living places. It also created technical working groups on workers' rights and included capacity building of female peer leaders and construction site owners and managers.</li> </ul>

## Resources for addressing GBVH in construction

[Good Practice Note Addressing Gender Based Violence in Investment Project Financing involving Major Civil Works](#), World Bank, 2018. This Good Practice Note helps identify and manage risks of GBV in major civil works contracts, including during construction.

[Good Practice Note: Managing Contractors' Environmental and Social Performance on Contractor Management](#), IFC, 2020. This note aims to help clients manage the environmental and social (E&S) performance of their contractors, subcontractors, and other third parties working for the project.

[Violence against Women and Girls: Infrastructure and Cities Briefing Paper](#), Infrastructure and Cities for Economic Development (ICED), 2017. Briefing paper provides a framework, practical guidance and examples of how to integrate considerations around violence against women and girls in urban and infrastructure programming. It includes a section on construction.

[Building a Safer World: Toolkit for Integrating GBV Prevention and Response into USAID Energy and Infrastructure Projects](#), USAID, 2015. USAID Toolkit to help technical and programme teams address GBV as part of energy and infrastructure projects, including during construction.

**To find out more, please see [Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment: Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector](#).**

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