



# Changing perceptions

*Women Build Global Village volunteers turn heads in India*

PHILLIP JORDAN

The women of the Hegde Nagar neighborhood in Bangalore, India, are taking inspiration from the volunteers of a Habitat Women Build project.

*By Phillip Jordan*

As a two-week Women Build project progresses in Bangalore, India, more and more women living in the city's Hegde Nagar neighborhood are taking note of the builders at work.

Nearly 100 volunteers, mostly women, are helping to create 15 new homes in the community. Sixty-two volunteers traveled from five different countries to participate.

On Thursday, at house No. 13, volunteer crew leader Pam Merrill talked with a pair of Indian women who had come to watch the volunteers work.

One of the women, a neighbor from down the street, had visited the work site the day before. She was so surprised at the women she found digging, hauling, mixing that she called her cousin across town and told her to come see.

"The cousin came up to me and said, 'It is a good example for us to see you come here to work,'" Merrill said.

The cousin went on: "I hear people who have seen you say, 'These women have come across the world to help—we Indian women can do this, too.'"

That's precisely the reaction that Habitat for Humanity India wanted to

create with this Women Build Global Village. The Bangalore project began with a very intentional celebration—on International Women's Day, March 8—to highlight the issue of Indian women living in poverty housing.

The building has been interspersed with educational presentations from some of Habitat India's partners that work on housing and women's rights issues. Many of Habitat's partner families in Hegde Nagar are headed by mothers. Some are widows, but many have been deserted by their husbands.

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Jenny Williams, leads a crew of Women Build volunteers from Northern Ireland at the Hegde Nagar site. Volunteers on the build also have heard educational presentations from Habitat India's partners.

## Celebrations in Zambia and Bangladesh

Volunteers in India weren't the only ones marking International Women's Day with action.

Habitat for Humanity Zambia launched its 2010 Women Build project in Lusaka, with a public appearance from Zambia's first lady, Thandiwe Banda. During its series of volunteer Women Builds, Habitat Zambia aims to raise \$500,000 to build 80 houses that will provide shelter for at least 320 orphans and other vulnerable children.

And Habitat for Humanity Bangladesh hosted a Women Build in its capital city of Dhaka on International Women's Day. The event also enabled volunteers and partner families to take part in an open dialogue on issues affecting Bangladeshi women.

## Women Build

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On Thursday, volunteers listened to Dr. Duarte Barreto, of Fedina, an Indian organization that focuses on promoting rights for workers, women and other disadvantaged groups—and partners with Habitat India to provide housing for low-income families.

“When these women are deserted, their husbands will often keep the dowry and the title to the land,” Barreto said. “So, many women left without title to their land can be thrown off at any time.

“I am glad you are here for this Women Build, and I hope you will do even

more. Here, and in your own countries, fight for these rights. Fight for legislation. And empower women through women-led programs such as this one.”

The Women Build continues through March 17. And the volunteer ranks swell daily as Indian volunteers, along with expatriates from England, France and the United States, join partner families on the build site.

Charon Frazier, an American volunteer, said language barriers haven't prevented volunteers and family members from connecting. The family at Frazier's house told the volunteers that they thanked God for them, and even gave the volunteers the honor of choosing the

paint color for the new home—and that wasn't all.

Frazier said the father came up to them at the end of the day Thursday and said: “I want a picture of all of you up in our house. I want it up so that our children, and our children's children, will know who helped us build this home.”

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