



# Families are helping themselves in India

Shanti Amma was among 15 families who worked with international volunteers during Habitat India's Women Build in Bangalore, India, this March.

By Phillip Jordan

*Habitat for Humanity India's Women Build in Bangalore attracted 62 Global Village volunteers from five countries this March. The volunteers built alongside 15 partner families to launch a 150-house campaign in Hegde Nagar, a poor but diverse community on the outskirts of Bangalore.*

*Most families moved to Hegde Nagar in the 1980s from urban slums in Bangalore after the local government made land available. Other low-income families from nearby states have since joined the community. Habitat India's partner families saved money for their new homes through women-led self help groups.*

*Here is a look at one family the Women Build volunteers built with.*

Shanti Amma's right hand is in constant up-and-down motion as she talks with Habitat staff inside her old home. The tiny shelter becomes a hotbox during the 90-degree day, and Shanti Amma insists on fanning her guests as they talk with her.

Her old house is claustrophobic, with a low, tin roof and untreated wood

beams infested with termites. The house is as clean and decorated as she can manage, though. Today, there are mango leaves hanging from the top of the doorway—a typical decoration on Ugadi, the lunar New Year celebrated by Kannada-speaking Hindus in India.

Seven people live inside this house—Shanti Amma, her husband, her sister, and her eldest widowed son and his three children. Five of them sleep on the floor, with their legs under the twin-sized bed.

Still, Shanti Amma says: "It is better than the thatched-leaf house we first built when we moved here."

In 1973, five years after Shanti Amma and her husband, Krishnan, were married, Krishnan's health deteriorated. She has been the main income-earner for the family ever since, working first as a housemaid, then as an aide at a Montessori school, where she looks after children and cleans the restrooms. Shanti Amma has learned four different languages thanks to the different homes and schools where she has worked.

"My husband is proud of me," she says with a smile.

Other family members pitch in, too, hoping to make enough to provide

proper schooling for the grandchildren. Her eldest son sells vegetables from a pushcart in the community, and the family makes their own brooms, which they sell for 10 rupees each whenever they have extras.

Three years ago, Shanti Amma joined a local self-help group and has contributed savings each month. She will take out her first loan from the group to build her new Habitat house.

"I'm so thankful to have a new home," Shanti Amma says. "Honestly, I never thought I could. But we will soon have a bigger, cleaner house."

International volunteers helped finish the walls on the family's new house during the Women Build. While other family members pitched in, Shanti Amma had to work at school most days. She always looked forward to returning home.

"Day by day, as the blocks build up, I'm so happy to see them rising when I come home," she says. "It's just hard for myself to believe."

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