

# 'My girls are getting a future here'<sup>[1]</sup>

In India, parents who migrate to cities often have no choice but to leave their children alone while they work at low-wage jobs. Now there's some relief.

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

NEW DELHI — By midafternoon, Usha Devi's one-bedroom home was a mess. Her infant daughter spilled water on the bed, and her toddler smeared food on the floor and picked up a knife as her 10-year-old thrust her homework under Ms. Devi's nose. "I only get an hour for lunch," Ms. Devi said, prioritizing her youngest and unbuttoning her blouse to breast-feed the baby.

This precious, chaotic hour is the only time during the day that Ms. Devi, who lives and works on a construction site at Narela, on the outskirts of New Delhi, can be with her children.

Millions of people like Ms. Devi, 33, are leaving their ancestral villages and migrating to urban India to take construction jobs as India's cities continue to swell. Ms. Devi works as a sweeper for a government project that is building low-income housing for residents of Delhi's slums.

Construction accounts for roughly 8 percent of India's gross domestic product. But the economic pressures on these low-wage workers are disrupting age-old living patterns in villages, where grandparents and family members have traditionally cared for children while their parents worked on ancestral farms. In cities, parents who migrate from rural areas often have no choice but to leave their children alone while they work. The children of construction workers are often left to raise themselves and one another.

Ms. Devi is somewhat better off than others who have migrated to Delhi. On the site where she works and also lives, in simple housing provided by her employer, a charitable organization called Mobile Crèches ("crèche" means nursery in French) has set up a child-care center where her girls are looked after for eight hours a day Monday through Saturday, with a break at home for lunch. "My girls are getting a future here," Ms. Devi said. "They go to school every day. They get food. They don't get hurt. They're safe."

Mobile Crèches and its partners run 60 day care centers on construction sites and in urban slums around India. It's a relatively modest initiative given the enormous need, but it remains an important model of how child care benefits low-income families. Centers focus on early childhood development and nutrition as well as play — an important part of childhood and social and emotional learning that remains undervalued by parents and many educators.

Meera Mahadevan co-founded Mobile Crèches in 1969 after she saw street children in Delhi playing at a construction site, neglected by working adults. As India's construction industry has grown, the organization has scaled up: Since its inception, about 750,000 children have been cared for. Of note, many alumni have attended top Indian universities and landed coveted office jobs, both of which are usually beyond reach for children of India's low-wage workers.

"When looking at a vision of new India, to know that our youngest are still excluded from the most basic entitlements — nutrition and care — it just compels you to do something," said Sumitra Mishra, executive director of Mobile Crèches. "There is a lack of support structures. Not every builder provides child care. It is stopping women from being more effective in the construction industry."

Successive governments have taken note of the organization's successes. Mobile Crèches now trains hundreds of caregivers in low-income communities and government-run rural child care centers. In 1996, partly through the organization's advocacy work, a law was passed that requires all construction sites with 50 or more female workers to have on-site child care centers. Although poor administration and corruption have left the law largely unenforced, Mobile Crèches encourages builders to comply by offering to set up facilities if companies are willing to finance and accommodate them.

India's construction industry is the country's second-largest employer, after agriculture. The work force is largely unorganized and unskilled. Women are expected to earn money, do housework and look after children. Most do not have maternity entitlements and have limited access to welfare.

The sight of unsupervised children from low-income families is so familiar in India's cities that for many Indians, the children go largely unnoticed. Though similar day care centers have been set up on construction sites in India and in other countries, it is often left to the good will of companies, leaving many parents with no good options for care.

For parents in white-collar jobs, child care in India is still far from the norm; for workers like Ms. Devi, employed in the informal sector, it's barely available and far from a legal right. In 2016, the government increased paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks, but the law applies only to the formal sector. More than 90 percent of the female work force is employed informally, and they are left out. Without child care options, many mothers have no choice but to leave paying jobs.

Rural migrants come to cities for short stints, until the seasons change, or sometimes for a few years, hoping to save up. With little education or money, they have limited opportunities. They devise temporary homes under tarpaulins and tin panels on sidewalks or under street overpasses, or rent cheap rooms in slums. Many end up doing factory work or set up roadside businesses. Others, like Ms. Devi, do temporary work on construction sites.

According to a 2011 report by Mobile Crèches, about seven in 10 children on construction sites are malnourished; newborns are often deprived of the health benefits of breast-feeding, and older children frequently miss school. Incomplete immunizations are common, too.

Many women on construction sites take young children to work because they have nowhere else to leave them, said Mubashira Zaidi, a research analyst at the Institute of Social Studies Trust. Interviewees in a recent study told her that children taken to work sites were often injured by falling debris. "Women were aware of the risks involved in taking their child to work sites, but expressed not having a choice," she said.

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Mobile Crèches alone can't change the centuries-old belief that child care should be left to women, but it can illustrate the powerful social and economic benefits that quality child care can bring to all families, regardless of their social status.

Before she starts her job at 8 a.m., Ms. Devi prepares the family's meal, washes clothes and gets her girls dressed for school. When she comes home, she cooks again, cleans some more and prepares the girls for bed. Her husband sits outside, talking with other husbands.

But in Ms. Devi's case the organization's efforts have allowed her to expand her ambitions by taking away the burden of child care and letting her earn her own income.

Ms. Devi's fortunes have risen since she moved to the city. Now she has a kitchenette full of utensils and an electric fan she gazes at with pride. Next on the list, Ms. Devi said, will be a flat-screen television, an ambition that would have been well beyond reach had she stayed in her village.

"There, all day I work," she said. "Here, I can rest."

**Related link:**

**Region:** Asia <sup>[3]</sup>

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