OVERCOMING POTENTIAL RISKS TO FEMALES EMPLOYED IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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Abstract
Legislation in South Africa tasks the construction industry to increase employment of women in traditionally male workplaces. Susceptibility of women to negative factors (some contributing to HIV and AIDS) and the counter-active measures open to industry are explored. Empirical data were gathered via questionnaires and interviews to gain perceptions of employers and site-based employees. Findings comprise: sexual harassment; critical mass [numbers]; male chauvinism and sexism; and personal on-site safety. Female employees are more positive than male about women working on-site and overcoming male chauvinism and sexual harassment. Critical mass of women on site is seen as a prerequisite for safety. Women, more than men, consider sites inadequate in meeting safety and personal hygiene requirements of women. These factors contribute to exposure of women to risk of HIV and AIDS. The findings showed involvement with community and scholars improves women’s options in construction. Employees need to be more proactive in sensitizing male workers to the role of women in the industry and their potential contribution.

Keywords
Women, construction, personal risk, HIV and AIDS, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

This paper establishes the context of risk factors for women in the South African construction industry and debates the potential impact it has, and will have, on women working in the industry. Lack of critical mass (‘safety in numbers’), sexism and sexual harassment, and poor safety conditions are risk factors for HIV and AIDS. The urgency of this topic is underlined by current drives in South Africa to increase skills and labour capacity on site (Construction Industry Development Board [CIDB], 2004), yet both unskilled and skilled labour have been and remain in high risk HIV and AIDS categories (Whiteside and Sunter, 2000; Development Works, 2002; Ahwireng-Obeng and Akussah, 2003; Bowen et al., 2008, UNAIDS, 2010). Equally, it may be assumed that existing risks of HIV and AIDS to male construction workers will apply to women in similar positions. There are factors which have an impact on women because of their gender and which may also impact on the risk of contracting HIV and AIDS. For example, for women on construction sites in South Africa these