

District Level Consultation on Understanding the Safety of Domestic Workers in their Workplaces

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Venue: Community Hall, Carlton 4
DLF Phase 5, Gurugram



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District Level Consultation on Understanding the Safety of Domestic Workers in their Workplaces

Introduction:

A district level consultation was organised by Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF) and Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) in collaboration with Embassy of Netherland on 24th October 2017 in Gurugram District. Officials from the government departments such as the Labour department, Local Complains Committee were invited. NGOs and Unions were also invited along with the domestic workers from Harijan Basti. This consultation was seen as a platform for bridging the gap between the domestic workers, unions and the government.

Nandita Pradhan, Senior Programme Manager welcomed everyone and there was a short round of introduction. The initial discussion started with a discussion about the problems that domestic workers face in their everyday lives and how frequently they face harassment at their workplace regarding wages, job security, health, leaves, etc. Most importantly these women do not want to talk about sexual harassment as they do not have any other option but to work.

One of the participants said that, “it is the fault of the women. If she behaved inappropriately then she will be harassed”. This participant Rahena Mandal is a domestic worker and she has observed that women are easily harassed when they voice their opinions. In response to this, another domestic worker, Sarita said, “women stay quiet and this is the reason behind their harassment”. She also felt that women must not speak if they want to secure their jobs. This is the only choice women have.

Many of the domestic workers have experienced that whenever they have helped somebody, those people have created problems. Domestic workers understand that they must take a stand against the harassment they face in their everyday lives but they do not receive enough support when the time comes. The facilitator asked why they are not able to speak up against the sexual harassment they face. Why so? The response received from the participants was that they are threatened with their job, they will be blamed for robbery, they will not be allowed to enter the building, etc.

The participants were introduced to the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, Redressal) Act 2013 and it was discussed that this law protects informal sector women workers (including domestic workers) as well. The representative from the Labour Department, Mr. Puran Chand, explained about the services they provide to the labour, such as giving INR 7000 to the expecting mothers, providing expenses for children’s education, etc. But the Labour Department has no provision of services for the domestic workers.

Mr V. S. Raj from NDWM wanted to know if it is possible to have a union just for domestic workers, but it seemed that it is almost impossible to have a union just for domestic workers. Many such organisations face difficulty in forming a union.

The Nodal officer of Local Complains Committee, Mr. Nagendra Singh, spoke about the services that can be availed by the women. He explained that procedure in which the victim of sexual harassment can seek redressal from the LCC. The procedure is receiving the complaint, reviewing the law, interviewing the two parties, reasoning, finding and recommendation and finally submitting a report within 90 days of receiving the complaint.

As he explained the procedure, the participants also asked since domestic workers work in multiple households and some of them are part-time workers, how are they going to do all this?

They are unaware of the procedures and they don't even have access to the helpline number. How should the women collectivise then? If they are not able to speak to each other due to lack of time, they would not be able to collectivise at all. How can we bring justice to the grassroots level? How difficult it is to engage the District Collector and the Additional Collector on these issues.



In every state, each district is mandated to have one District officer and s/he will look after the proceedings of the LCC. The LCCs are formed to provide justice to the victim of sexual harassment in the informal sectors. It was recommended that the LCC should go to the women rather than expecting the women to come to them. They must identify themselves as the agency that is there to look after the safety of the women.

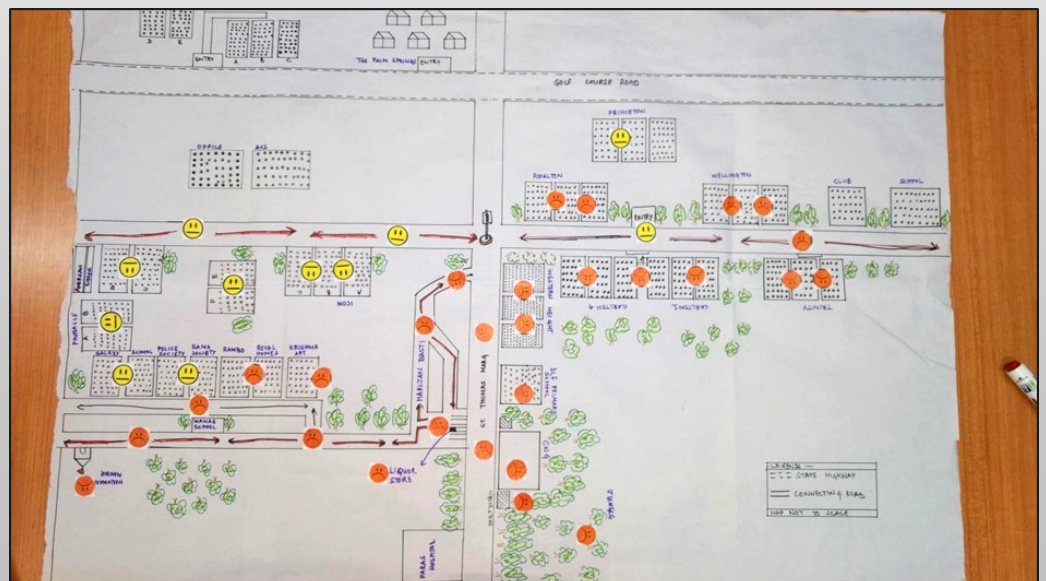
These women are constantly facing violence in their everyday lives which is mostly sexual in nature. They are groped while they are on their way to work, they are threatened to be thrown out of their jobs if at all they raise their voices, and they are locked inside their employers' homes so that they are unable to communicate with others.



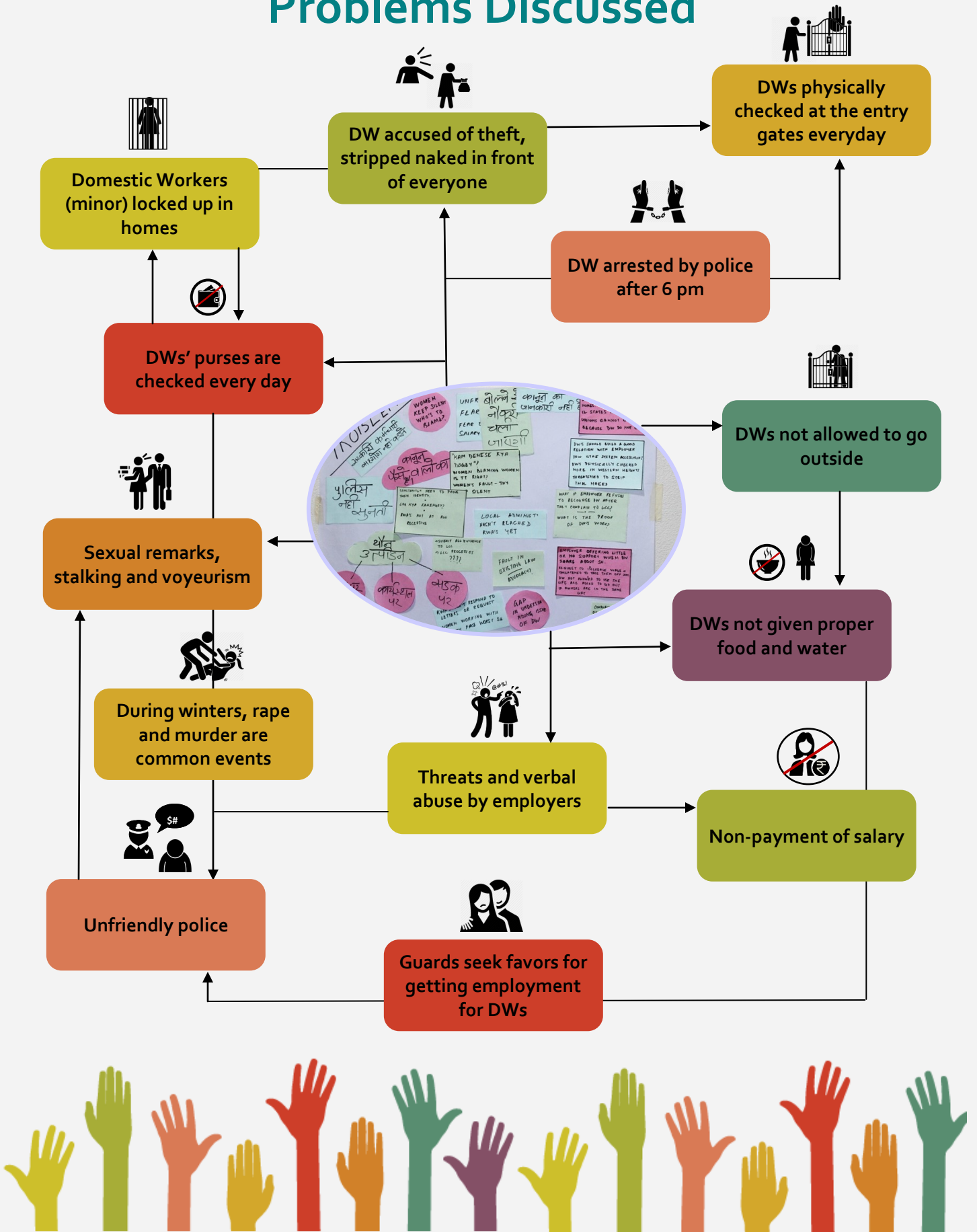
A Safety Map was prepared by the domestic workers. They assessed their own safety from their door step till their place of work. They were able to find out that not only were they harassed at their workplace but the path to workplace was highly unsafe as well. As these women started mapping, they covered all the apartments where they all work. Following is the final map that was shared during the consultation. All the participants were overwhelmed to see the map as they had heard about the safety issue, but to have seen it in a map was something that they were not anticipating.

Safety Audit Map Home to Workplace

-  Most Unsafe
-  Moderately Safe



Problems Discussed



There were some suggestions/queries by the participants:

- The LCC could -collaborate with the RWAs so that domestic workers are able to contact it immediately.
- If something happens, what are some of the procedure these women have to follow in order to file a complaint?
- There is no system in place at the grass root level. Some officer should always be available for women.
- Contact number of the appropriate officer should be readily available for assistance.
- The punishment that could be given to the perpetrator should be explained to all the employers before hiring domestic workers.
- There should be a formal document which tells who is the employer of these domestic workers. The employers keep all documents of the domestic workers, but these women have no information about the employers.
- One of the domestic workers present there said, *“there is no relation between the employer and employee. There is only an exchange of services for money. If there is accountability from both ends, maybe then the situation can change”.*

The consultation ended with a note that the issue of sexual harassment will not be taken lightly. Assistance by the LCC at the grass root level should be strengthened therefore making it accessible to all. This was a first of a kind consultation where members from unions, NGOs, government offices and domestic workers had come together. No one had ever talked about these issues before and it was a good learning for all to know more about this. The participants have been working with domestic workers for 2 to 3 years now and they haven't touched upon this. The participants wanted to conduct more such consultations in the future along with government officials to bridge gap between policy formation and their implementations.

