

Stitching Stories: A Participatory Action Research by Domestic Workers in Delhi-Gurgaon on Sexual Harassment in their World of Work

Authored by
Martha Farrell Foundation
12th November 2020



India is home to roughly 4.2 million domestic workers according to data from the Indian government. A majority of them are women. Gender norms and

prescribed gender roles have contributed to this, as the household is primarily seen as the woman's turf.

Domestic work in India is mostly informal. As a consequence issues such as low wages, ill-treatment, physical and sexual harassment, non-payment of wages, lack of set working hours and no leaves or holidays, are a regular part of their lives. Given that household work is hardly looked at as being of any value, paid household work in others' homes is also not regarded as work (Mehrotra, 2010: 3).

Consequently, domestic workers in India earn wages as low as between ₹1,000 - ₹ 3,000 per month (PRIA and MFF, 2017). Compounded with the issues of a stark class divide, systematic undervaluation of their work, and the fact that they are often poor, migrant women from lower castes; domestic workers feel their work has an inferior status, a belief echoed in the communities they work with.

Exacerbating their vulnerabilities further is the reality of the informality of their work and their lack of protection under labour laws in India. India also continues to be one of the few countries that has not ratified the International Labour Organisation's Domestic Workers' Convention (C189), which offers specific protection to domestic workers, laying down basic rights and principles and requiring States to take a series of measures to make decent working conditions a reality for domestic workers.

In this world of work, there's heavy prevalence of instances of sexual harassment and abuse in the hands of employers and lack of judicial support and systems in place for redressal mechanisms, despite the presence of a law that protects them.

The PoSH Law and Domestic Workers

In India, the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act came into effect in 2013. It clearly defines and includes in its ambit both formal and informal workers. It mandates the institution of Internal Committees (IC) in the institution level and Local Committees (LC) in the district level, for complainants to file their complaints and seek redressal.

Under the Act, the definition of the 'workplace' has expanded to include a dwelling place, or a house (Section 2 [0]). The Act also expands the definition of an employee to include domestic workers, defined as a woman who is employed:

- To do household work in any household
- Either directly or through an agency
- On a temporary, permanent, part-time or full-time basis
- For remuneration in cash or in kind

A domestic worker, therefore, has the right to seek redressal from the Local Committee, in the event that they face an instance of sexual harassment at the workplace. The Local Committees, which have the powers of a civil court under the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, are required to complete the inquiry in a period of 90 days, in case of a complaint. Additionally, the LCs are mandated to conduct regular awareness and sensitization sessions for employees and employers in the district, to brief them on the provisions of the Act.

However, domestic workers under the Law do not have the same right to a time bound justice delivery mechanism as other women employees. With the invisibility of the workplace of domestic workers, their employers too remain largely invisible and exempt from all such training and orientation programs if at all they are held.

When the #MeToo movement kicked off in the United States three years ago, in 2017, domestic workers were among the many women to share their grievances and ensure their voices were heard, with clear calls to put a stop to sexual harassment in their world of work.

However, the movement's offshoot in India nearly a year later, revealed a very different scenario - the movement took off with gusto among women workers in corporate, media, development and other sectors. But when it came to the informal sector, particularly domestic workers, the movement barely made a mark. Even if they wanted to, domestic workers could not actively join the movement in India, because it was largely led by digital media, and most domestic workers were not Internet savvy, or users of social media platforms.

The Saree Project

To understand the world of work and the extent to which instances of sexual harassment are faced by domestic workers, a Martha Farrell Foundation-led participatory action research project was carried out over a period of ten weeks (May to July 2018) with domestic workers in Delhi and Gurgaon. A research team comprising domestic workers and program staff of MFF designed and conducted

all sessions at a mutually decided time in the homes of those in the research team - thereby also creating a physical safe space for conversations to take place.

The co-developed approach to collect data included:

- Use of local language
- Assessment questionnaire was administered by domestic workers who co-designed it
- Time would be mutual and space would be at a space identified as a safe space by domestic workers themselves
- A scenario- experience - based quantitative analysis co-designed with domestic workers (members of research team) to understand what domestic workers in general associated with sexual harassment at work and what they didn't associate with it.
- An art-based project to allow personal and collective experiences and emotions related to sexual harassment at workplace

Participant Demographics:

A total of 45 domestic workers (14 from Gurgaon and 31 from South Delhi) joined the research and 14 among them participated in the saree project.



The Gurgaon-based domestic workers were all migrant workers from the states of West Bengal (78.5%) and Bihar (21.5%). All participating domestic workers from South Delhi belonged to Delhi. Their ages ranged from 18 - 50+ years, with 31% being between 18 - 29 years, 50% between 30 - 49 years and 11% over the age of 50. Their working experience ranged from 31.1% being between 6 months and 4 years, 35.5% between 5 and 9 years, 24.4% between 10 and 14 years, and 4.4% between 15 and 20 years. Around 4.4% didn't comment. 88.9% of them were married, 6.7% were unmarried, and 4.4% did not comment. Only 7 out of the 45 didn't have children.

Key Findings from the Questionnaire

- **What is Sexual Harassment?**

All 45 domestic workers agreed that 'someone touching you for too long' and 'making inappropriate comments' were forms of sexual harassment, and only 1 didn't think rape was sexual harassment. The same person also disagreed that stalking and staring fell under sexual harassment. Out of 45 women, 29 said they had never experienced any of the above situations, while 16 of them said they had. 11 among them voluntarily shared details about their experiences. Three among them said that they had faced Quid Pro Quo forms of sexual harassment.

"The guard said 'you love me' and I'll give you better job opportunities"

"Our guard from the workplace was following and the next day he followed me again and was offering me ₹500"

"Where I used to work, the housekeeping staff tried to sexually harass me, they tore my clothes."

The main emotion the women felt when the incidents occurred was anger.

- **Did they tell anyone?**

14 out of the 16 women who said they'd faced an instance of sexual harassment said they'd told someone about their experience. In most cases, they had told a family member out of fear. Among those who told their supervisors or employers; some found success, with the perpetrator somewhat punished; in one woman's case, the guard that had harassed her

was fired. 10 women also said they knew someone who had experienced one or more of the above-mentioned examples of sexual harassment.

“Out of fear, I told my husband”

“When I informed my madam, she hit me”

- **What is sexual harassment?**

“Eve-Teasing” “Rape” “Forcibly Touching in Wrong Places” “Lewd Comments” “Ogling” “Stalking” “To affect someone deep inside”

When asked an open-ended question about what they thought constituted sexual harassment, the 43 out of 45 women gave varied responses, that amounted largely to the words above. 2 women refused to respond.

- **Where do such incidents happen?**

When asked where they thought such instances happened, 41 of the women gave multiple answers with the most frequent being ‘it happens in the workplace’ or ‘it happens on our way to and from work’. Other responses included ‘on the road’, ‘in the market’, and ‘around their homes’. 2 women refused to respond, while 2 others said they’d seen no such instances.

“These things happen inside our houses, on our way to the workplace and also at our workplace.”

“Every place, workplace and while coming home.”

- **Is this sexual harassment?**

When presented with the following four situations, each constituting a category of sexual harassment, here’s what the women had to say:

1. *Zara is a domestic worker. She is making dinner for her employers in one of the 3 houses she works in. Her employers are sitting at the table in the kitchen. The madame goes to the washroom. While the madame is in the washroom, the sir tells Zara that he likes how her hair looks today and that she looks beautiful. Zara shies away. Zara’s employer asks her if she has a boyfriend/husband, Zara replies ‘yes, I have a husband’. Her employer responds by saying her husband is a very lucky man. The madame comes back into the kitchen.*

In this scenario, where the situation constitutes verbal sexual harassment, here's what the women said:

27.5% disagreed that this was sexual harassment, of whom 12 were aged between 18 - 30 years and another 12 between 30 - 50 years.

2. Diya is cleaning in the living room. Her male employer comes home early from work. Diya greets him and he winks at her. He then sits down on the sofa. He sits and looks at Diya. She doesn't think anything of it. He stays seated just staring at her while she cleans. When Diya turns around, she notices that her employer was looking at her rear.

In this scenario, where the situation constitutes non-verbal sexual harassment, here's what the women said:

87.5% agreed that this was sexual harassment, of whom 17 were aged between 18 - 30 years and another 17 between 30 - 50 years.

3. Anika is cleaning the room of her employer's 19-year-old-son. On his desk are 2 pornographic magazines and on his bedside table is a box of condoms.

In this scenario, where the situation constitutes visual sexual harassment, here's what the women said:

20% of the women disagreed that this was sexual harassment, with the highest level of disagreement coming from the age group of 30 - 50 year old respondents.

4. Lakshmi is going through security on her way into the building where she works. There are two male guards present. One of the male guards is about to start frisking Lakshmi when she notices he doesn't have a hand machine. She asks for a female guard, but he ignores her and begins frisking Lakshmi. He runs his hands firmly over body and slowly pats on her chest and rear.

In this scenario, where the situation constitutes visual sexual harassment, here's what the women said:

87.5% agreed that this was sexual harassment, with the women in the age group of 18 - 30 years and 30 - 50 years being at par in terms of recognising the act as sexual harassment.

The Art Project: Stitching Stories



The third round of data was collected using an art-based approach. The idea was to allow women to use art as a medium of expression to express emotions and experiences related to the sexual harassment stories heard in the earlier group discussion. Fourteen women agreed to be a part of the project.



Through the activity emerged personal stories of sexual harassment, abuse, child abuse. Where some had used the space to express in writing, others painted and cross-stitched. One domestic worker created a cross-stitch art piece, depicting the

This experience led the 14 women to co-lead a mobile based survey along with the domestic worker champions (who were part of the research team) with 291 other domestic workers with the purpose of making them aware that they no longer have to bear or tolerate or stay silent when sexually harassed. They are protected under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace law. All 291 women said that they had been sexually harassed and did not know about the law and the Local Committee.

Conclusion

Clearly, sexual harassment in the workplace is a pervasive issue and in the invisibilised world of work of domestic workers as well. It's also an issue that can't be ignored.

The women in India's informal sector might not be using a hashtag, but there's no doubt that scores of them have their own 'Me Too' stories. Art-based approaches, in particular, can help them break the silence and share more freely, anonymously. It's evident that the culture of silence that heavily shrouds this sector of working women is instilled from a young age, although slowly, girls are willing to speak up now.

The role of community and collectivisation remains ever important in such situations, where chains of solidarity formed between the women becomes a means for emotional support and sisterhood.

The perpetrators have, so far, got away with their actions with no repercussions. The women continue to struggle without their Me Too platform. But in this community unity, this sisterhood and solidarity they find their strength and are learning to push back. Through effective implementation and sensitive authorities, the law must support them.