

Meri Silai Machine
Final Project Report
September 26, 2022

With Meri Silai Machine, women domestic workers associated with the Swabhiman Kendra (Community Support Centers set up with and by women domestic workers and their adolescent children) in Panipat and Gurgaon, are partnering with Martha Farrell Foundation and MoMAGIC Foundation to take steps towards making their aspirations to learn how to sew a reality.



Under the program, MoMAGIC Foundation donated four sewing machines and 40 sewing kits to the women and girls of the Swabhiman Kendras, based on a proposal submitted by the women, to support them in building their skills and enabling them to kickstart small-scale entrepreneurial ventures from the Centers, to supplement their income as domestic workers and tide over the economic crisis brought on by the pandemic.

Location-wise Impact: Panipat (Haryana)

The Meri Silai Machine program was inaugurated on March 13, 2022 in the Swabhiman Kendra (Community Support Center) run with and by women domestic workers in Bichpadi village. Under the program, a total of 32 women domestic workers and 24 adolescent children of informal workers have learned/enhanced their sewing skills.

Sonia Khatri, a field facilitator working with Martha Farrell Foundation on various programs in Panipat, was appointed lead instructor under the Meri Silai Machine program. Leveraging her experience as an expert tailor, a six-month learning module was developed, under which women domestic workers and adolescents advanced from basic to intermediate sewing skills.



Impact Stories

Meenakshi, 26 years old

Since the inception of the program, Meenakshi signed up and attended the training program. Since then, she has learned how to stitch suits, patiala pants, dhoti pants, circular palazzo pants, kurtis and pajamas. She has begun taking stitching orders from her community members, and has begun earning up to Rs. 4000 from the clothes she stitches.

Seema, 30 years old

Seema has learned advanced stitching through the program, and has now begun stitching gowns for members of her community. She says, *“I have begun saving a lot of money on our clothes, because I now stitch my own clothes and my children’s clothes, as well. The savings are very helpful for my children’s educational needs.”*

Monica, 19 years old

Monica has begun stitching designer clothes. Through the program, she’s been able to hone her skill and begun preparing for a job in the garment sector. The program has enabled her to work towards her aspirations. As a fallback plan, in case she doesn’t find a job, Monica is determined to open her own boutique and put her newly learned skills to use.

Lalita, 33 years old

Lalita has progressed to advanced tailoring through the program. In order to ensure that more people could benefit from the program, Lalita brought her own sewing machine to the Swabhiman Kendra. Using her newly learned skills, she has begun taking orders for clothes from her community members, colleagues and fellow domestic workers and even her employers, and has begun earning an additional income of up to Rs. 6000 per month.



The sessions also serve to create enabling spaces for women and adolescents to co-learn, speak to one another about their thoughts and feelings, and form bonds of friendship and solidarity. Many women expressed that they come to the sessions not just to learn tailoring, but also to use it as a space and avenue to interact with their friends, and ensure their children had a safe space to interact with their peers. Having such safe spaces is completely new for women and adolescents of Bichpadi village, who, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19, have experienced increased restrictions on mobility

and sexual and gender-based violence in the personal and public spheres.

The *silai* machines offer a means of earning additional income, which is why families allow young women and adolescents to come to the Center and learn. Sessions have also enabled conversations between mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law, building bonds of trust and solidarity between women who experience domestic violence within the same households. Such bonds are essential to overcome patriarchal structures and empower women in families to eventually be able to overcome the cycle of violence in their lives.

Location-wise Program Updates: Gurugram (Haryana)

The Meri Silai Machine program was inaugurated in the Swabhiman Kendra (Community Support Center run with and by women domestic workers and their adolescent children) in Harijan Basti, Gurgaon on March 25, 2022.

Akhalema, a domestic worker and small tailoring business owner residing in Harijan Basti, was identified as a lead instructor for women domestic workers interested in learning *silai* under the program.

Two batches of learners learned *silai* under the program, a beginner batch who were taught basics of stitching and an intermediate batch, who built on existing knowledge of using sewing machines. A total of 34 learners (women domestic workers) are currently benefiting from the program.



Women have advanced to cutting blouses and *kurtas*, stitching suits and special stitching techniques used to tailor *dupattas*. From Akhalema, they have not only learned sewing, but also entrepreneurial skills. Leveraging her experience as a small tailoring business owner, Akhalema taught participants budgeting, pricing of products and how to purchase and ration raw materials for maximum outputs.

Impact Story

Of the 22 participants, 13 have begun a tailoring business of their own, using learnings from the program. Three among them have begun stitching clothes for children to wear for festivals, and *kurtas* for women to wear on occasions. The Swabhiman Kendra has become a hub from which the clothes are sold. The women get the word out through word-of-mouth, as there is a large display wall in the Swabhiman Kendra where some of the finished products are displayed.

As a next step, this group of entrepreneurs plans to diversify their products, and begin making pouches and sling bags. A marketing and sales strategy involving the setup of stalls in the upcoming festival month is in the works.

Reflections

Finding common aspirations and being able to work together towards achieving these aspirations has enabled women domestic workers to feel empowered and safe in one another's company and begin speaking openly to one another. The common sense of purpose has also enabled them to support one another to overcome personal challenges to be able to meet their goals as tailors and entrepreneurs.

Among learners, there is a clear orientation towards taking their learning and moving towards achieving their entrepreneurial aspirations as well.



Having two female instructors leading sessions has also enabled participants to re-look at *silai* beyond the traditional conception of being a male-dominated space. Each one aspires to be a '*masterni*' (master tailor), some have also begun giving thought and voicing their entrepreneurial vision in line with this aspiration.

Women partnered with the Martha Farrell Foundation have proven, yet again, that women working together in solidarity with one another have enormous potential to reshape their lives. When they begin countering the patriarchy, women not only hold one another up, but encourage each other to achieve their potential, giving each other words of encouragement that have otherwise been absent in their



lives. The impact stories that have emerged through a short, six-month project alone is enough to be a testament to this.