

Meri Abhilasha

Community Support Center (Swabhiman Kendra)
for Women Domestic Workers and their Adolescent
Children: Building Resilience in the Pandemic

Monthly Report - February 2022
Submitted by Martha Farrell Foundation



Overview

Struggles with discrimination, unfair treatment, low wages and sexual harassment in the world of work are harsh realities that dominate women domestic workers' professional and personal lives. At the same time, they are proud women workers, who contribute as equal partners in their households, bring up their children and take care of their families. They work with dignity and self respect.

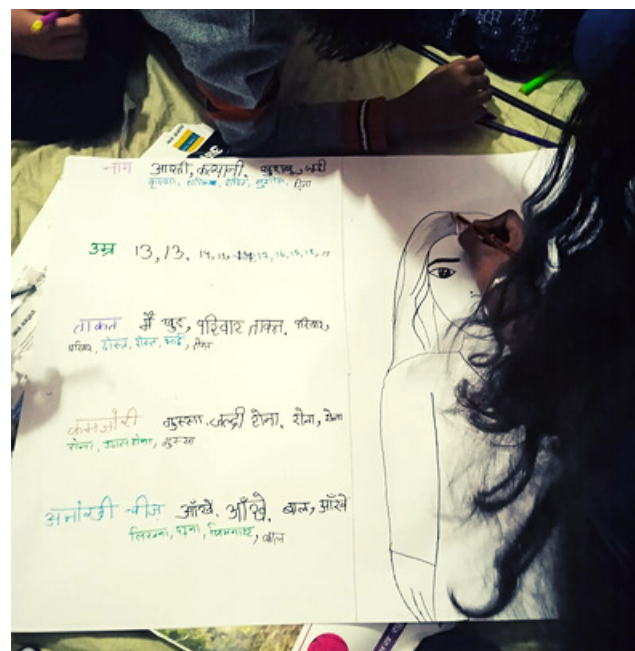


When the COVID-19 pandemic began, however, their dignity took a hard hit. With no warning, women domestic workers lost their jobs. As savings dwindled, they were forced to subsist on dry ration, often without three square meals a day.

The impacts of the pandemic were felt disproportionately by the women and their children, in particular. Violence, particularly sexual violence, which was already high in their homes and workplaces, increased markedly during the pandemic, exacerbated no doubt by the economic hardships the families were facing.

Socialisation processes, stigma and silence around such issues have historically sealed women's silence on such experiences. Lack of awareness about laws, mechanisms to support and confidence to be able to speak up and seek justice acted as further deterrents. The women lost faith, in themselves, their families, in public institutions and their communities.

Consequently, daughters of women workers (who have already been inheriting the culture of silence around sexual violence) have also begun to internalise the same mistrust in their own personhood, their families and society. Many of them were forced to drop out from school, and became trapped in violent and unsafe spaces with abusers within the family. Some were forced to take up domestic work to support their families. Their vulnerability, fear and this culture of silence also increases the risks they face to personal safety in personal and professional spheres.





The most urgent, non-negotiable need they express during these trying times, is additional income to tide over future unprecedented crisis situations, and put an end to instances of violence and sexual harassment in their personal and professional lives. At this juncture, to alleviate these vulnerabilities, it has also become absolutely essential to rebuild confidence, hope and build awareness among women and girls in the community. It is also essential to work with boys, to create gender-sensitive and empowering ecosystems, which are free of sexual and gender-based violence.

With 'Meri Abhilasha' (Community Support Centers for Women Domestic Workers and their Adolescent Children: Building Resilience in the Pandemic), DSP Investment Managers and Martha Farrell Foundation are supporting women domestic workers and their adolescent daughters to break out of the cycle of violence and oppression that generations of women in the communities have been forced into, which have been exacerbated in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The program was titled 'Meri Abhilasha (my aspirations)' by women domestic workers and their daughters and has been initiated in two locations:

- With adolescents and women domestic workers in Gautampuri, New Delhi, through the setup of a Resource and Support Center Women Domestic Workers and their Adolescent Children
- With adolescents and women domestic workers in Harijan Basti, Gurgaon, where Martha Farrell Foundation has an existing Resource Center

Highlights: February

- **Set up of the Community Support Center in Gautampuri, New Delhi**

Gautampuri is a resettlement colony that was established in 1999/2000, with an estimated population of 1 lakh. Residents from the community estimate that it houses roughly 15000 families, largely migrants from North Indian states. Most women work as domestic workers in nearby households, with a few who also work as construction workers.

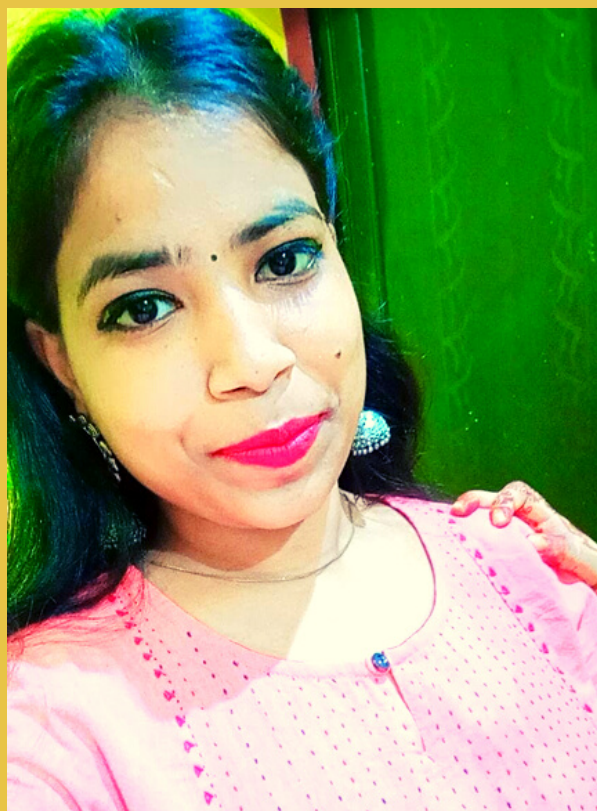
The Swabhiman Kendra at Gautampuri has been set up in a single building at the center of the community. Program work led by adolescents takes place in one room, and program work led by women domestic workers takes place in the other room.

The Center is quickly growing in reputation as a safe space for women domestic workers and adolescents across the community to use as their own. Nearly 100 women domestic workers and 80 adolescents have already been collectivised at the center.

A field facilitator, Nidhi, daughter of a domestic worker who resides in the community, has been recruited for the set up and management of the center, including collectivising of women and adolescents.

Meet Nidhi, Field Facilitator, Gautampuri for 'Meri Abhilasha'

Nidhi is the daughter of a former domestic worker who resided in Gautampuri, New Delhi. She is the oldest child of her parents, and grew up in a violent and unstable home environment. Nidhi's father, an alcoholic and serial gambler, was extremely violent, and would frequently abuse his wife and Nidhi physically. Nidhi's mother, the sole earning member of the family, passed away during the first wave of COVID-19 in India, after a long illness. After her mother's passing, Nidhi's father abandoned the family, leaving her in charge of her siblings. Currently, Nidhi is pursuing her studies and supporting her siblings with her income as a field facilitator.



Reclaiming Identity, Dignity and Confidence with Women Domestic Workers in Gautampuri

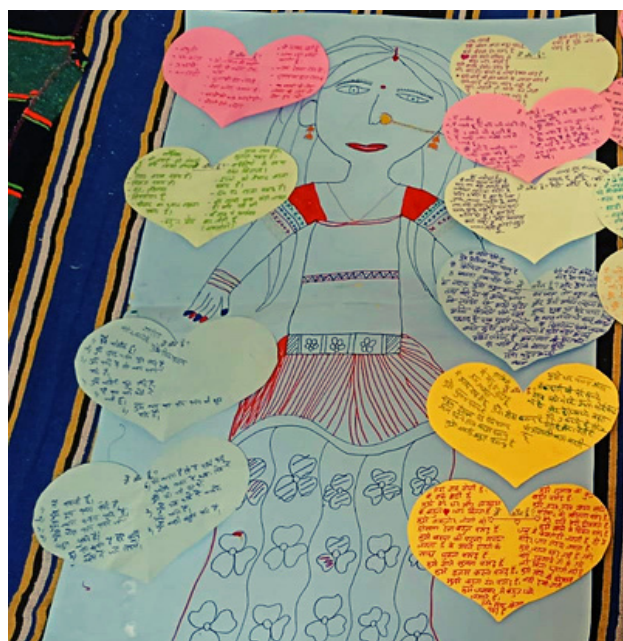


As a first step towards actualising the goals of the project, women domestic workers in Gautampuri participated in an exercise to re-explore their identities as women, workers and citizens. Through the exercise they initiated conversations that enabled them to re-assert their identities, identifying their strengths, weaknesses and personhood. The exacerbated challenges of the pandemic had made them lose their faith in themselves, and in their community. The exercise, held on February 16th with 26 women attending, served as a first step for participants to rediscover their dignity, and their bonds of friendship and solidarity, and begin feeling confident about themselves again. The participants began to open up about their lives and stories, and felt safe enough (perhaps for the first time in their lives) to have these conversations together in a physical space, recognising the Swabhiman Kendra as such a space that is theirs to use.

"When I was a child, I used to think that I will visit places, but after my marriage I couldn't do it. Today, I realised that it is still not too late to fulfill my dream"

- Sunita (name changed), domestic worker

On February 18th, the conversation with the women domestic workers continued through a problem mapping exercise, wherein women domestic workers began to voice their challenges, challenges that impinged on their rights and aspirations. Such challenges included sanitation issues, lack of safety from sexual violence, lack of transportation facilities, unclean toilets and poor quality of education for their children, among other things. The conversation also enabled participants to begin identifying persons responsible for ensuring rectification of the challenges, thereby building a base for the women's advocacy initiatives.



Reclaiming Identity and Confidence: Reimagining the World through My Eyes with Adolescents in Gautampuri and Gurgaon



Adolescents in both locations participated in conversations using art as a medium for expression and opening up conversations to reclaim their identity and lost confidence, in Gurgaon and Gautampuri, on February 18 and February 15, respectively. A total of 20 adolescents participated in Gurgaon and 30 adolescents in Gautampuri. Through the conversations, adolescents began to explore their identities beyond what they'd been told about themselves. They learned to identify their strengths, their weaknesses and their similarities and differences with one another, marking the beginnings of their self-awareness, confidence building and sense of kinship with their peers.

The initial conversation with adolescents were taken forward through participatory problem mapping exercises in both locations. 20 adolescents participated in the Gautampuri, 23 adolescents participated in Gurgaon. Through the exercise, the adolescents began reimagining the world through their eyes, identifying some of the key challenges faced by them in their community. Subsequently, they began to identify stakeholders responsible for their welfare, setting the foundation stones for their advocacy initiatives to actualise a world through their eyes. Key challenges to emerge:

Gautampuri: Sexual harassment in the community, lack of public spaces to play, alcoholism among men in public, lack of freedom of choice in terms of the clothes, and dirty toilets in school, among others.

Gurgaon: Lack of safety of girls in public spaces, alcoholism among men, poor sanitation, no recreational spaces for children and no toilets for girls in school.

"I think everything about myself is unique - the way I dress, the fact that I like to ride a bike, and keep short hair. Today, I could openly talk about my choices."

- Niharika (name changed), 18



Key Learnings:

- Art-based participatory methodologies have proven very effective in enabling women domestic workers and adolescents to build trust with one another and begin breaking the silence on the challenges faced by them
- The initial problem mapping exercises conducted with women domestic workers and adolescents have underscored the need for Community Support Centers in the communities, that are led by individuals who are providing trauma-informed, survivor centered information on the conditions of residents, particularly women and children, in the communities
- Although women domestic workers in Gautampuri have begun opening up about the challenges they face in the community, they still hesitate to hold conversations about their experiences of sexual and gender-based violence in all spheres of their lives, revealing the degree of silence and stigma around the issue and the amount of fear that continues to dominate their lives
- Adolescents are keen to engage in the program and be a part of the solutions to the challenges prevailing in the community, revealing their potential for leadership and change-making towards gender justice and equality in society



Next Steps:

- Jashn-E-Awaaz, a one-of-a-kind event led by women domestic workers and adolescents, will be organised and hosted in both Community Support Centers on the occasion of International Women's Day. The event will mark the formal inauguration of the Community Support Center in Gautampuri. Domestic workers in Gurgaon will participate in their first exercise for making a CV.
- Problem mapping exercise sessions with women domestic workers in Gurgaon
- Participatory Safety Audits, a participatory tool to map safety in a community, will be conducted with women domestic workers and adolescents in both communities to bring out challenges to safety from gender-based violence in both locations

Communications:

A [landing page](#) for the project has been created and activity reports are being updated to develop new knowledge about running such a program and culling out lessons and challenges for this model of leadership and aspiration building to become sustainable and replicable in other communities and locations, as well. The formal inauguration of the Community Support Center in Gautampuri, New Delhi, is planned for March 8, 2022, to mark International Women's Day celebrations in the Center.

