Learning to trust my Voice

Adolescent Children of Women Domestic Workers in Gautampuri, Delhi and Gurgaon, Haryana hold conversations on their strengths, weaknesses, fears and vulnerabilities

Details:
Gautampuri: On February 15, 2022, with 30 adolescents (29 girls and one boy)
Gurgaon: On February 18, 2022, with 20 adolescent youth (9 girls, 11 boys)

Introduction

COVID-19 had severe impacts on the lives of women informal workers (domestic workers) in India. Many families were forced to forego meals during the lockdown, and gender-based violence in the community and in homes saw a marked increase. Forced to compromise their families’ well-being for survival, trust, and faith in themselves and the system was shattered. This has deeply impacted the lives of the adolescent children of these women. Anecdotal evidence from studies conducted by MFF evidence that girls, especially, were pulled out of school and forced into domestic work during this period for a variety of reasons including supplementing family income, inability to pay fees, and no access to mobile phones. During the Second Wave of COVID-19, a study conducted by Martha Farrell Foundation on the lives of women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR revealed that the women feared for the wellbeing and mental health of their children. Out of 4463 women domestic workers who participated in the study, only 18% said their adolescent children were able to continue their education.

As a consequence, the mental health of adolescents, particularly girls, was severely impacted. Their potential as future leaders of their communities and the country is being squandered. Trapped in their homes with no education and in some cases, with abusive family members, adolescents have lost their confidence and hope for a future. There are no conversations about their futures and careers, as neither their mothers, nor the rest of their families are able to give time, resources or priority to their future wellbeing.

Meri Abhilasha, a program led by women domestic workers and adolescent children in Gurgaon and Gautampuri, supported DSP Investment Managers, is creating a safe, empowering and conducive environment in two Swabhiman Kendras (Community Support Centres) in Gautampuri and Gurgaon, to enable the women domestic workers and their adolescent children to overcome the challenges of the pandemic, and build back by reclaiming voice, agency and space. Through the program, adolescents are being empowered to overcome this fear, hopelessness and helplessness, by honing and exercising leadership skills, actively participating in community-based interventions for change and support to complete their formal education and plan their futures.

1 The gender disaggregation is based on the genders assigned to participants at birth in both locations for the purposes of the report. Through subsequent conversations, any change in identity or orientation expressed by the individual will be recorded (with anonymity, if requested).
Mothers and their children are learning to hold one another up, and provide mutual emotional support and confidence to build back their resilience and dignity.

**Highlights from the Conversation in the Swabhiman Kendra, Gurgaon**

As a first step towards building back their confidence, adolescents met in the Swabhiman Kendra, Gurgaon. In the beginning, girls and boys sat in separate groups and did not speak with one another freely. Mixed gender conversations were a new experience for them.

The idea of having space to speak their minds freely, without experiencing backlash, was also new to adolescents. Constricted family spaces, traditional setups and strained relationships with their parents, in homes governed by traditional patriarchal norms, had created a deep sense of fear, lack of confidence and discomfort. Consequently, they were extremely shy in the beginning of the conversation and hesitant to speak up.

Mindful of the fact that the fear of speaking and interacting with other genders stems from years of conditioning and learning that has consciously sought to separate individuals in gender segregated ‘boxes’, oppressed women and girls and held all men responsible for the oppression. Gender based violence is rooted in patriarchy led gender discrimination and inequality and requires that we (of all genders) realise this and work together to address it.

The conversation was conducted in a very gentle, non-confrontational manner in a safe and supportive environment to enable the participating adolescents to break out of their years of conditioning and learning.

**“Who am I?”: What are my strengths?**

A first step in building back resilience is to acknowledge one’s own strengths and believe that one can. Using words, poetry, art/drawing, the adolescents were asked to first focus on their own strengths, then on their interests, likes, dislikes, strengths, and aspirations. If comfortable they were encouraged to also reflect on their weaknesses. The drawings also represented how they wanted to be seen and viewed by others.

They shared in mixed gender groups and discovered that irrespective of their (assigned) genders, the strengths and hopes were the same. The challenges of gender enforced roles and identities were also a shared experience.

A female participant’s feeling that her crying too soon was a weakness led to an interesting discussion. She had said “Mai bahut jald rojaati hu, ye meri kamzori hai aur mujhe isse ubharna padega kyunki ye mujhe dukh toh deti hai par saath ki saath bahut din tak asar kar deti hai (My biggest weakness is that I cry very easily, and this is something I must learn to overcome. When I cry, it doesn’t just impact me for a day, it affects my mood for several days together)”
Others began by commenting that crying or being emotional is a ‘girls’ issue’. But then a male participant quietly spoke out, “I cry a lot, when I am hurt.” This opened up the space for others too to reflect and share deep feelings without fear or hesitation.
As the conversation progressed, participants began encouraging each other to pursue their interests, promising to help one another achieve these aspirations. A male participant said, “Mujhe gymnastics karna bahut pasand hai, par mujhe kabhi nahi patah tha ki ye meri asal takaat hai. (I enjoy gymnastics, but I had no idea that this is my strength because no one ever told me it was).”

Another male participant similarly expressed, “Meri takaat hai kisi se bhi dosti karlena, kyunki mai bahut funny hu. Mujhe nahi laga tha ki funny hona bhi koi takat hota hai, par ab laga ki ye meri strength hai (My strength is that I can easily make friends with anyone, because I have a very good sense of humour. I didn’t know that having a sense of humour can also be my strength).”

Recognising that the space was safe enough to share her vulnerabilities, a female participant said, “Mera asaani se sab pe trust karlena meri weakness hai. Kaafi logo ne mujhe hurt bhi kara hai iss wajah se, mai soch samajh ke ab kisi pe trust karungi thoda samay lene ke baad. (My biggest weakness is that I trust everyone so easily that I’ve been hurt by people in the past because of this. Going forward, I’ve decided I’ll take my time and think about it carefully before I trust a person).”

A male participant said, “Mere dost aur meri family hi meri taakat hai. Mujhe aaj ye jaan ne ko mila ki mere jaise itne saare logon ki taakat unki family hai (My friends and family are my strength. Today, I’ve learned that everyone here like me has this in common - we all draw our strength from our families).”

The session was a strong first step in enabling adolescents to begin trusting one another. When participants were hesitant to share their weaknesses, others encouraged them to share freely, reiterating that they would help each other overcome them. It was also the first time that adolescents of different genders were able to mingle with one another, without fear of retaliation, repercussions of violence or harassment.
**Highlights from the Conversation in the Swabhiman Kendra, Gautampuri**

A similar activity based discussion was conducted with adolescents in Gautampuri, Delhi. participated in the discussion. Adolescents in Gautampuri were recovering from very similar circumstances and contexts as their counterparts in Gurgaon. Coming from equally traditional family institutions that were extremely hard hit by the pandemic, they had faced severe shortage of food, and many were forced to give up their educational pursuits for jobs during COVID induced lockdowns. Gautampuri is a much bigger settlement compared to Harijan Basti, and is located close to railway tracks, and the general feeling of lack of safety by women and girls in the community is much higher. Girls and women do not venture out of their homes after 7 pm in the evening, fearing sexual and gender-based violence. Through Meri Abhilasha, the women and girls are being supported to begin speaking about these challenges, as a first step towards action.

The first facilitated discussion with adolescents in Gautampuri drew active and enthusiastic participation from the girls. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, they had access to a space where they could freely express themselves without any fear. Despite the fact that it was a first meeting for many participants, the bonding was quicker during the session, perhaps because nearly all participants identified themselves with the same gender.

It was observed however, that the one male identifying participant was shy and hesitant to speak up in the beginning. He was the only participant who kept his mask on throughout the discussion and didn’t voluntarily participate in the discussion, until prompted by the girls. The facilitator observed that although he roamed the streets of his community without a mask, he put it on and kept it on within the room, during the discussion.

At the beginning of the session, participants shared that they were very motivated to be a part of the Swabhiman Kendra, however, they had no direction or idea on what they were going to do as a part of this collective. The adolescents were supported to explore their identities and identify their strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes.

The facilitator divided participants into three groups, and encouraged them to discuss with one another before expressing on a sheet of chart paper the answer to the question “Who am I?”

Adolescents began sharing with one another their likes, dislikes, hobbies, aspirations, strengths and weaknesses. The conversation helped them overcome the initial hesitation to share their vulnerabilities, they followed the facilitator’s lead, in sharing her own fears and shortcomings.

A breakthrough moment from the discussion took place, when a female identifying participant shared, "Har cheez mere baare mein mujhe unique lagti hai, jis tarah se mai dress karti hu, mujhe bike chalana pasand hai, chotte baal rakht hu. Aaj mai khulke bol paayi apni choices ke baare mein. (Everything about me is different and unique. I dress differently from other girls, I like to..."
ride a bike, I keep my hair short. People see these things, but today, I have been able to talk about them openly."

The facilitator then led the discussion with participants about how actions and choices need not be governed by the genders we are assigned at birth. We are free to be who we are. The female participant shared how her choices often drew comments from people, but it did not deter her from doing what she wanted.

Other adolescents also began to speak up about themselves. "Accha yeh laga ki aur logon ki weakness bhi same ho sakti hain, aur woh mere jaise feel karte hain apne weaknesses ke baare mein (It feels good to see that others have weaknesses as well, and they feel the same way about their weaknesses as I do. I used to feel very alone before when I thought about my weaknesses)," expressed one female identifying participant.

The group with the male participant were able to sense his discomfort and alienation from their experiences, and to make him feel included, drew a typically male figure alongside a female figure on their chart paper. They took special measures to include him in the conversation, prompting him to share his observations and thoughts through the discussion as well.

Participants also began sharing what their hobbies and interests are, activities they haven't been able to pursue in their homes due to various reasons, including lack of time, space and money. A female participant shared, "Mujhe art karna bahut pasand hai, aur mujhe khushi hai ki mai iss centre pe aake kabhi bhi drawing kar sakti hu. (I love drawing and it makes me very happy that I can come to the centre and can draw anytime I want)."

Another female participant said, "Mai humesha dance ko ek hobby ki tarah dekhti thi par mujhe ab ehsaas hua ki ye meri taakat bhi hai (I have always considered dance a hobby, but today I realised that it is also my strength)."

The conversation was successful in drawing most participants from their shells and enabling them to speak to one another openly. Participants also shared that the session helped them feel more at home in their Swabhiman Kendra, and excited about their journey of change that they were embarking on, as individuals and as a group.

**Reflections**

- Although adolescents in both Swabhiman Kendra were talkative and made friends with one another more quickly as compared to their mothers, it did not mean that they were easily able to open up to one another about their difficulties and challenges. The activity-based approach in the two sessions has helped them take a step forward in overcoming their fears and learning to trust one another. Through the activities, they were able to feel less alone with the challenges they currently grapple with.
• Adolescents have a lot of potential for change. In both sessions, it was clearly observed by the facilitator that the older adolescents naturally took the initiative to support younger participants and include them in the activity, giving them space and platform to speak. Lack of discussions around their potential, or faith in their ability to create impact, by their families and educational institutions have robbed them of their confidence. Reacquainting them with their sense of self and their strengths through this session and subsequent sessions, and giving them such a platform to express themselves, will help them develop their self-confidence.

• Gender roles and socialisation processes have been constantly reinforced in the lives of adolescents. To be able to work together, there is a need to enable adolescents to unlearn patriarchal norms and become more comfortable with one another, regardless of their gender or choice.

Next Steps
The conversation is a step in the direction of enabling adolescents to regain their sense of confidence and feel a sense of safety, solidarity and kinship with one another. A motivator for them to work together and support each other further, would be to help them find common ground in the challenges they face for their self-development. In line with the same, a problem mapping session outlining community-level challenges that need to be resolved for overall development is being planned with adolescents in both locations.