

“Humein kabhi aisa jagah nahi mila tha, jisme hum hinsa ke baare mein baat kar sake (We have never had such a safe space to talk about instances of gender based violence)”

Women domestic workers participate in a Listening Circle on Gender Based Violence

Date: 8th March, 2022

Place: Noor Nagar, South Delhi

Number of participants: 40 women domestic workers

Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff

Field Facilitators: Helen

Introduction

#मेंभी is a project to build resilient systems of change to prevent, prohibit and address sexual harassment in the world of work of women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR, started by women domestic workers and the Martha Farrell Foundation, with support from the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls. In line with the objectives of the project, and to celebrate Women’s Day, a ‘Listening Circle’ was conducted with and for women domestic workers on the issue of sexual and gender based violence, with particular emphasis on sexual harassment within the world of work of women domestic workers.

A ‘Listening Circle’ is a participatory tool that focuses upon community-oriented healing, and relationship-building processes. Within a Circle, the dialogue is guided by values that are suggested and agreed to by participants themselves. The Circle is premised on equality and equalization of power. Only the person holding the Talking Piece¹ may speak. The essence of this form of dialogue lies in the fact that it creates a safe space in which everyone’s dignity is honored and all participants feel seen and heard. A ‘Listening Circle’ was chosen to be the participatory tool to be used with and for women domestic workers in Noor Nagar, as this presented an opportunity for all participants to listen to shared experiences of sexual and gender based violence, while at the same time celebrating their own agency and values.

Conducted in the home of Farzana (a woman domestic worker), the Listening Circle was held in a cramped space at one corner of the settlement, due to the lack of a physical meeting area in the Noor Nagar settlement. Noor Nagar is an underdeveloped urban slum that is surrounded by a forested area. Makeshift houses, and open drains inhabit the community where around 500 families are residing currently.

Despite the setting, women domestic workers shared their experiences of sexual and gender based violence with great vulnerability. Participants reported that such a conversation was a first for many, and a listening circle provided for a cathartic avenue that also built solidarity among the women domestic workers.

¹A talking piece is any object that holds meaning for the participants in a Circle, which is either chosen by the facilitator, or participants themselves. This is then respectfully passed around the Circle, from one participant to the next, with participants being invited to use it in a manner that enables the holder to speak, while others listen with intent.

The conversation took place on International Women’s Day, under the event ‘*Jashn-e-Awaaz*’, to mark the celebration of women’s voices, and took place in various locations across districts of Delhi-NCR.

Women domestic workers started the session by placing their identity-signifying objects on a banner. These objects included bangles, *mehendi*, bindis, lipstick, a part of a broom, and pulses— all that they felt were integral to the identity of women domestic workers. This exercise was perceived to be important to promote self-reflection, and identity mapping.



Woman domestic worker with the ‘Jashn-e-Awaaz’ banner

The session began with a brief introduction to the issue of sexual and gender based violence, with particular emphasis on the concepts and definitions of sexual harassment at workplace. Next, the ground rules and values of a Circle were explained, and the process to be followed while participating in a Listening Circle were emphasised. Starting with a folk song, participating women domestic workers enthusiastically responded to all questions in different rounds of the Circle. The Circle started with a light, relationship-building question, where all were invited to introduce themselves and describe how they would like to spend a day if they were entirely unoccupied, with no responsibilities. Responses varied, and included activities as simple as wanting to sleep for an entire day, and spending time with their children— denoting the lack of leisure time for women domestic workers.



Highlights from the Conversation

The round of discussions about themselves, their likes and interests made participants comfortable and feel safe enough to respond to questions about the existence and perception of sexual and gender based violence within their communities. Participants reported that they did not feel safe both inside their homes (while referring to the widespread existence of domestic violence), as well as outside, in their communities (incidents of sexual harassment were most commonly faced in this sphere). As the instances of sexual harassment faced are also within the routes taken to the workplaces of domestic workers, they are within the ‘world of work’ of the latter.

Box 1: Woman domestic worker Farhana (name changed) shared:

“Mujhe toh lagta hai ki mahila kahi bhi safe nahi hai, ghar ke andar, ghar ke baahar, kaam pe jaate waqt, aur kaam ki jagah mein bhi (I feel that women are not safe both within their homes, and outside, even in their workplaces)”

Participants also shared that they were mostly unaware of the legal redressal mechanisms (including the ‘Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace’ Act of 2013). In addition to this, women domestic workers also noted that the lack of accountable institutions that address such instances of sexual and gender based violence (such as uninstituted Local

Committees, in the case of complaints of sexual harassment at workplace for workers in the informal sector) acted as barriers to reporting.

Box 2: Listening circle participant Rukhsana (name changed) shared:

“Humein to pata hi nahi kisko complain karna hota hai. Aur karein to bhi wo humein vishwaas nahi karenge, mahila hone ke naate, aur Muslim mahila hone ke naate (We don’t know where to file complaints. Even if we do, they would not believe us, because we are women, and Muslim women at that)”

The values of confidentiality were emphasized, and participants were reminded of the importance of “what’s said here, stays here, and what’s learnt here, leaves here.”

Participants then learned about the redressal mechanisms under the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013 and the Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act of 2005, keeping in mind the widespread prevalence of these two types of sexual and gender based violence. Participants expressed great interest in this session, with several women domestic workers enquiring about helpline numbers and other reporting mechanisms.



An important aspect of the learning circle was the creation of trust, and solidarity among all participants who reported that they had never shared instances of sexual and gender based violence faced with such vulnerability previously.

Reflections:

- The widespread nature of sexual and gender based violence, and the interlinkages between these became apparent through this session, as participants reported facing domestic violence within their homes, and sexual harassment in their world of work.
- Women domestic workers had a limited understanding of the redressal mechanisms for sexual harassment at workplace. The lack of accountable institutions addressing such instances was also apparent, as participants were not aware of how or where to file complaints.
- The Participatory methodology of listening circles was useful in building relationships among participants in a safe space, and participants also noted that they felt a sense of catharsis following the listening circle.
- As the listening circle was conducted in Noor Nagar (where residents are primarily Muslim), with an interfaith community of women domestic workers, findings also included an intersectional understanding of sexual and gender based violence.