

“Kahani ki kitaab mein chitra dekha tha, socha nahi tha kabhi ki apni kahani bhi chitr se batai ja sakti hai (I had seen picture-based story books, but I never thought I would share my own story in the form of photos)”

Women domestic workers use art-based participatory research methodologies to break the silence on their experiences of sexual violence

Date: 27th October, 2021

Place: Offices of the National Domestic Workers Movement (NDWM), Govindpuri

Number of participants: 47

Resource Persons: MFF program staff

Introduction

Conversations about sexual violence are a heavily silenced topic in India. Consequently, it is very difficult to gain factual data about women’s experiences of such violence in the workplace. Among women domestic workers, who live in precarious economic and social conditions, lack access to social protection and have little to no bargaining power with their employers, the issue of workplace sexual harassment is even more silenced.

With #संभोगी, a project to build resilient systems of change to prevent, prohibit and redress sexual harassment in the world of work of women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR, MFF and women domestic workers of Delhi-NCR are attempting to break this silence using community-based participatory research methodologies to collect data and take a step towards ending the cycle of violence in the world of work of women domestic workers.

To this end, a Listening Circle was organised with 47 women domestic workers participating in the offices of NDWM, Govindpuri, South Delhi.

The Process

The women domestic workers came from across 8 districts of Delhi-NCR, and began the session by introducing themselves to one another. For most women, the experience of stepping out of their communities and meeting domestic workers from other parts of their city, was a novel experience. On learning that they had come together to achieve a common goal, to facilitate change and empowerment of all women domestic workers in the city, the women together sang a song and raised slogans for unity and empowerment of all women.

The facilitator then divided the women into small groups, and asked them to discuss what constitutes their workplace, and the challenges that they experience within their workplace.

Because the discussion was led using participatory and survivor-centered approaches, participants became comfortable with one another and felt safe to open up the discussion. Among the challenges they highlighted, sexual harassment in the world of work was also spoken about. While some women were able to break their silence on such experiences

immediately, others were more hesitant, however, the facilitators underscored that there was no pressure to express challenges, unless participants were fully comfortable.

The facilitators then asked participants if they were interested in drawing, painting and stitching. When most women expressed an interest, facilitators provided them with materials and asked them to express using art anything about themselves, their stories, or anything that they felt like putting down in the form of art.

The power of art is such that participants are able to overcome their inhibitions while expressing themselves. This was something MFF had observed while conducting an art-based exercise with women domestic workers of Gurgaon and South Delhi in 2017, wherein the medium of art helped the women express their deepest fears and experiences.

A similar result was observed in Govindpuri. Although women domestic workers were at liberty to draw or express anything about themselves, their initial discussion and feeling of solidarity for one another prompted them to begin using the medium to share their experiences of sexual harassment in their world of work. While drawing, stitching and painting, the women spoke to one another, expressing support and solidarity and empathy for one another's experiences and stories.

After completing their individual stories, the women stitched them together on a *sari* (traditional Indian garment, most often worn by women). The *sari* led women to the realisation that as women, regardless of age, religion or caste, sexual harassment in the world of work was a shared experience.

The Field Facilitator then introduced the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 to the women, before inviting them to be a part of a larger community of women domestic workers across Delhi-NCR leading research and advocacy to strengthen the implementation of the Act for women domestic workers.

Highlights from the session

Participants brought out through the discussion, that sexual harassment in their world of work was a common experience, despite the fact that there is no official data around the issue and the experiences of women domestic workers. Perpetrators of sexual harassment in the world of work of women domestic workers include their immediate employers, relatives of their employers, security guards, drivers, gardeners, among others. Sexual harassment of all forms and types had been experienced by the women. Women also expressed that such experiences don't exist in isolation, but in intersection with larger issues of social, cultural and economic marginalisation and discrimination that they are subject to.



Image 1: Women domestic workers support and empathise with each other's experiences of sexual harassment in the world of work

Although women domestic workers expressed a great interest in art and art-methodologies, being able to express themselves freely using art was a very new and different experience for them. Women expressed feeling shy and were convinced that this was something that their children could do better than them.

When they had broken their inhibitions and begun painting, women shared how good they felt participating in the exercise, and experiencing first-hand the magnitude of power art had, as they were able to use it to speak out about a silenced issue, without using words.

Box 1: A participant shared -

“Ye soch ke to bahut acha lag raha hai ki chitr bana ke bachpan ki yaad ko taza karenge, par jab mai apni kahani sochti hu toh zadatar khud ke saath hua bura vyavahar hi yaad aate”

(I was very excited that I got the chance to relive my childhood experiences of painting, but when I was asked to draw about myself, it pains me to realise that most of my memories and experiences are painful)

Women who had participated in such art-based participatory exercises also encouraged their peers and counterparts to participate, and underscored that such expression was cathartic, which resonated with other participants as well.

While expressing themselves through art, women domestic workers discussed with one another in groups the similarities and differences in their experiences. The stories were silently echoing in the room, gazes of solidarity from the women for women was clearly visible, as were nods of empathy from one another.

Powerful narratives/art pieces that women shared:



Image 2: Sulekha (changed name), 35 years from Okhla Vihar explained her art piece -

“Ek din mai kitchen me kaam kar rahi thi, mere niyokta ne achanak aa kar mere makeup aur kapdo pe tippani ki jo mujhe pasand nahi or maine us ke baad dar dar k kaam kiya”

(One day I was working in my employer’s kitchen, when suddenly my employer came and started commenting on my dress and make-up. I felt very uncomfortable, and since then, I’ve always approached that particular workplace with a lot of fear)



Image 3:

Four art pieces developed by women domestic workers, on their experiences of verbal sexual harassment in their world of work: women being asked sexually coloured questions by security guards and gardeners; being commented on by strangers on the way to work. Farzana (changed name), a 36-year-old woman domestic worker shared that she was harassed by a 40-year-old man while going to work, the man asked her “*Is your body machine working properly?*”



Image 4: Women domestic workers holding powerful discussions on shared experiences and solidarity with one another while painting

The *sari* was chosen to be the larger backdrop holding the women’s experiences by women themselves, because of how closely the garment is tied to their identities as women, as workers and as women domestic workers. The *sari*, women feel, knows their experiences and emotions as well as they themselves do.



Image 5: Women domestic workers stitching together their individual art-pieces (stories) into a *sari*

Through discussions and experience sharing, women were able to see clearly that despite the fact that they came from different geographical locations, were of different ages, spoke different languages and practiced different religions, their experiences of sexual violence in the world of work were the same. Using art to express these experiences served as a means for them to discuss, learn and develop a feeling of solidarity with one another.

Reflections

- Art-based methodology has the power to unite people and it can enable discussion on highly silenced issues such as sexual violence. Art is beyond language and region hence women from different locations felt deeply connected with each other during the whole process. Using art-based tools can easily help women overcome hesitation and create a safe, enabling and empowering environment with and for one another.
- Women domestic workers of all ages, regions, religions, geographies experience violence and sexual harassment in their world of work. In a single day, they face more than one or all form of sexual harassment (verbal, non-verbal, physical and visual), and lack of data around the issue and experiences are a result of cultural and socio-economic pressures.
- Sexual harassment is something for which women choose to be silent because societal pressure and fear of stigma but when they hear similar experiences they collectivise as a group and talk about it, which gives them strength and power. Most



often women anonymously want to highlight their concerns, fear and issue - expression through art provides them with that platform.