“Kitni baar raaste mein log bolke ya chu ke nikal jaate hai. Par itna samay ya sahara kaha hai jo hum iske khilaf kuch kar paye”

(“Every other day someone or the other sexually harasses us on our way to work. But who among us has the time or the support to take action or seek justice?”)

Highlights from a participatory training session on sexual harassment at workplace with women domestic workers of Seemapuri, Delhi

Date: 13th October 2022
Place: Seemapuri, North East Delhi
Number of participants: 40 women domestic workers
Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff

Introduction

#म  भ ी is an initiative to strengthen institutional mechanisms under the 2013 Law for the protection of women from sexual harassment in the workplace, led by women domestic workers and the Martha Farrell Foundation, funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women.

A baseline analysis of the challenges women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR face in accessing their rights and the mechanisms under this Law shed light on several key issues, including a lack of awareness about the law, a lack of institutionalisation of the mechanisms in question, and a lack of awareness of the issue of sexual harassment at workplace, its various forms and types being illegal. This initiative in partnership with women domestic workers is an ongoing effort to empower individuals, influence and empower systems for holistic impact.

A participatory training session on the issue and the law was facilitated in Seemapuri, a small community in North East district of Delhi, which is home to many women who work as domestic workers in houses in the neighbouring area of Seelampur. Belonging to migrant families who moved to Delhi in search of work, most women in the area work to supplement their family income and ensure they can make ends meet. Ages of women domestic workers in the area vary, but across the board, challenges of low wages and lack of paid time off persist in their professional lives, adding to their vulnerability.

The session was designed to start conversations on these issues, their linkage to the issue of sexual harassment at workplace, its forms and types and the rights of women to safe and dignified workplaces.

Insights

Speaking about sexual harassment and experiences at the workplace is extremely difficult for women domestic workers, because of the deep rooted fear of backlash from community members, employers, and fear of loss of job. As most participants were part time workers, there was also a fear of losing other work opportunities. Building a circle of trust, and enabling the creation of a safe, judgement free space for discussions was instrumental in opening up the conversation. Women were also encouraged to express their thoughts using art, which sparked conversations and discussions between participants.

When putting pen to paper to draw, women sought to understand from one another the aspects of what constitutes their workplace, the various different challenges they face in the workplace and how it increases their vulnerability to sexual harassment.
A participant shared -

“I was cleaning at my employers’ home, at a time when the woman was not home. The man, her husband, was in his room and he asked me to do my work and leave. While I was sweeping his room, he asked me to massage his legs and not to tell his wife about it. I panicked and just told him that I will do it after cleaning the balcony. I quickly cleaned the balcony and just left the house, I was quite scared that he would do something to me. I’m still shaken by this incident.”
A participant shared -

“Once, when I was on the way to work, a man started following me. I tried ignoring him, but he began to make inappropriate comments about how I was walking and what I was wearing. I ignored it at first, because it is a daily experience for us, but then I just turned around and slapped him with my sandal, because I couldn’t take it any more.

During the discussions on mechanisms to seek justice for such experiences, participants also shared that the only forum they knew of was the police. The Local Committee mechanism under the 2013 Law was not known to them.

Participants also reflected on the need for women to be united and take a stand on behalf of all women against such violence.