“Yahan pe humey kothio me bahot hi kum paisa milte, usme hi hum guzara karte hain. Humey kuch kuch cheezo ko na chahte hue bhi ignore karna padta hai (We are paid very poorly here in the kothis, we survive on that minimum salary. In this situation, we ignore things even when we do not want to)”

Women domestic workers of Okhla Vihar, Delhi participate in a participatory training on the prevention of sexual harassment at workplace

Date: 11th May 2022
Place: Okhla Vihar, South Delhi
Number of participants: 30 women domestic workers
Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff
Field Facilitators: Helen and Sarvari Raju

Introduction

is a project to build sensitive and accountable institutional mechanisms to prevent, prohibit and redress sexual harassment in the world of work of women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR, started by women domestic workers and the Martha Farrell Foundation, supported by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls. Awareness and orientation of women domestic workers on the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace and the law for their protection from such violence is a critical aspect of the project.

The only available open space, an empty plot in the settlement, was selected for the training. It was an area surrounded by residences as well as a large sewage line on one side. The open space is usually used by children to play.

In Okhla Vihar, the session was conducted using case studies. The session began with an ice breaker during which women domestic workers were asked to speak about their work. Responses ranged from “cook” to “cleaner”, however, none of the women identified themselves as ‘domestic workers’. This is important to note, because the identity of domestic workers has been included as such in the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. Collectivised domestic workers together can seek strengthened institutional mechanisms under the Act.

Highlights from the conversation

Most women domestic workers were hesitant to speak about the issue of sexual harassment in the beginning of the session. The facilitator observed that women used terms such as ‘ched chaad’ (teasing), or ‘pareshaan karna’ (troubling) instead.
In response to a case study of sexual harassment in the world of work of domestic workers, which involved visual forms of sexual harassment, participants shared some of the following reflections:

“Yeh toh bikul galat hai” (This is completely wrong)
“Humare saath yeh bohot bada hota hai, agar mahila niyotka ghar nhi hoti toh pure time darr laga rehta hai” (This happens with us very often, when the female employer is not at home we feel scared while working)

In response to a case study involving non verbal forms of sexual harassment, they reflected:

“Yeh sab toh hota hi hai, kisko ko rok ke bolengey” (This happens with a lot of us, but we cant stop all of them)
“Guard bahut badmash hote hai, kaam dilane ke chakkar mein badtameezi karte hai” (Guards are notorious, they harass women by promising to get them jobs in buildings and such)

In response to a case study on quid pro quo type of sexual harassment at workplace, participants reflected:

“Depend karta hai ki uske dost kaun hai, agar koi mahila hoti toh shayad yeh galat na hota” (It depends on the gender of the employer and friends, if it’s a woman it won’t be wrong)
“Par jab mere kaam mei massage dene ki kahi baat nhi ki toh mai kyu karen? Chahe purush ho ya mahila” (But if my job role doesn’t require me to give a massage, why would I! Even if it’s a female)
“Aisa hota hai aur kuch gharelu kamgar mahilaye majboori ki wajah se mana nahi kar paate hai” (This happens to women domestic workers, some are unable to say no because of their helplessness)

Case Studies:

Case Study 1: Vimla is a domestic worker who works for a family of 4 (mother, father and 2 children. One day, the family is out and the son is at home while Vimla is performing her duties. The son is playing inappropriate songs on the TV and Vimla does not feel comfortable while working. Is this sexual harassment at workplace?

Case Study 2: Reshma is a domestic worker who goes to work for a family in a building. While coming to work, the building’s guard looks at her and bites his lips. Is this sexual harassment at workplace?

Case Study 3: Sita is a domestic worker and her employer asked her to stay late at night as there were guests over for a party. He promises her to increase her salary in exchange for her giving him and his friends a massage. Is this sexual harassment at workplace?

Reading or listening to the case studies enabled participants to gain a better understanding of the forms and types of sexual harassment in the workplace. It also triggered conversations around women’s own experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace.

Geeta (name changed) shared:
“I used to work for a single man some years ago, he offered to take me out shopping if I would stay at night in his house. I found this to be inappropriate and called him out. I could not file a complaint so I asked him to pay me my dues and left that job”

Participants also discussed how the culture of silence and survivor-shaming around the issue continues to be a problem and prevents women from speaking up about their experiences. As women, participants said they had been taught since childhood to protect their dignity or ‘izzat’ instead of speaking out against sexual violence. Such conditioning impacts them to date, holds them back from speaking up and filing complaints.

The session was a conversation starter also in terms of the various forms and types of sexual violence that are prevalent. Women domestic workers were able to recall past experiences when they had ignored or sidelined non-physical sexual harassment.

Women also discussed the extent to which their workplace extends, their ‘world of work’, given many such instances in their past had happened in relation to their work, either while travelling
or in the same building as their direct workplace, or in the hands of those who were present in their workplaces.

Further, participants were told about the avenues they could access to file complaints of sexual harassment at workplace, during which women domestic workers also shared that apathy and insensitive handling of cases by police and authorities acts as a major deterrent for filing complaints.

A participant concluded the session with a song: “I will ask questions, it does not matter if you seal my lips.”

**Reflections**

Holding conversations on sexual harassment is not easy. Particularly with groups that are economically and socially marginalised, even more so after the COVID-19 pandemic’s onset. Holding this conversation by creating a non-threatening and conversational backdrop for the training session, where input and information sharing was a two way process, supported the process to a certain extent. Learning about rights and laws was also seen to be of interest and led to a general feeling of empowerment. The methodology also supported empathy building. Many participants who had not experienced certain forms and types of sexual harassment in the workplace, were inclined to disbelieve colleagues who had. Understanding the issue from this perspective, that social conditioning forces women to be silent when they experience such violence, helps break such inherent biases, build trust and empathy.