Women domestic workers of Jasola Vihar, South Delhi participate in a training session on sexual harassment at workplace

Date: 11th July, 2022
Place: Jasola Vihar, South Delhi
Number of participants: 40 female domestic workers
Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff
Field Facilitators: Helen Raj

Introduction

#म  भी 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, 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 community members of Jasola Vihar had already participated in the baseline study of 1939 women domestic workers and their experiences of sexual harassment in the world of work, when this training session was organised. The baseline study found that most women in this community work in residential colonies, apartments and independent houses close by. Awareness of legal mechanisms was negligible as found during the study.

The participatory game-based learning tool, ‘Chaliye, Milkar Seekhein’, was used to facilitate conversations on the issue, rights to safety in the workplace and legal mechanisms. A key challenge presented by women domestic workers from across Delhi-NCR during this project, was that complex legal terms and jargon were hard to understand and retain. The participatory game was hence co-developed by program staff and domestic workers, as an interactive learning tool, which focuses on conversation building and contextualising information to one’s own individual contexts.

There is no space within the community in Jasola Vihar for women domestic workers to meet. A park, located about 2 kilometres away from the community was selected for the training session. Participants shared how through the project, during the baseline study, women domestic workers began occupying this park in larger numbers and claiming the space, which earlier was only occupied by men.

Highlights

It was observed by the facilitator during the session, the need to differentiate between “sexual harassment” and “sexual harassment at workplace”. For this purpose, women domestic workers were asked about the whereabouts of their workplace/office. Participants replied by saying “jaha kaam karte hai” (where we work). Many participants said “rasoi” (kitchen), “kothi” (house).

The participatory game, ‘Chaliye, Milkar Seekhein’ was extremely effective in encouraging participants to speak, learn and discuss the issue of sexual harassment at workplace. Women shared that the simplified language with which the game helped understand the Law helped with memory retention of concepts and processes. Learning about Bhanwari Devi, the social worker whose fight for justice eventually led to the Vishakha Guidelines, the first ever legal document addressing the issue of sexual harassment of women at the workplace in India, and the subsequent law that took forward the spirit of the Vishakha Guidelines passed in 2013, also helped participants unpack concepts of ‘workplace’ and its extended definition under the Act.

Participants’ reflections on Bhanwari Devi’s experience -

“Chahe unka khet unke ghar ke bahar hi tha par woh kaam toh wahin kar rahti thi” (Even if her farming land was right outside her house, it is still her workplace)
Women domestic workers were observed to be relating to the game and their own personal experiences and understanding the nuances of the workplaces of domestic workers- which are essentially someone else’s private space.

The game also triggered conversations on women’s own experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace.

**A woman domestic worker shared -**

“I used to work at a house, for an old couple and their family. Whenever I used to mop the floor or bend down for any kind of work, my male employer used to take off his pants or pyjamas. I tried to ignore this multiple times. But, one day I asked his wife, ‘Why does he do this?’ She said that it’s just a habit and that I should not bother. Eventually, I left that place of work.”

The game was also effective in enabling women domestic workers understand redressal mechanisms (Local Committees) available to them under the 2013 Act, for their experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace.
Reflections

Younger women domestic workers in the group countered pre-existing notions that sexual harassment happens because women dress provocatively. At the end of the session many women domestic workers stressed on the need for more unity and solidarity to achieve their rights and recognition, particularly among women themselves.

Lack of common and safe space for all women domestic workers remains to be a challenge. Identifying common meeting points like the park in Jasola Vihar can be convenient for a larger number of participants from the group and can also help motivate women to occupy public spaces.

Conversations also revealed that women who work longer hours in homes, 12-24 hours (full time), are far more vulnerable to violence. Women also expressed an interest in reaching out and connecting with them to understand their situations, and include them in their movement against gender-based violence.

The game-based learning tool was effective in encouraging and motivating women to speak up and build their confidence. Localised language and contexts supported greater understanding of complex terms and processes in the law.