“Mere niyokta ne kaam khatam hone ke baad mujhpe dabav dekar der raat rukne ko bola” (My employer tried to pressure me into staying the night at his home after I finished my work)

Highlights from a participatory training with women domestic workers in Devli, South Delhi

Date: 24th May, 2022
Place: Devli, South Delhi
Number of participants: 40 female domestic workers
Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff
Field Facilitators: Helen Raj

Introduction

#भारत 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 Devli, South Delhi, an urban settlement located in the South Delhi district. Many women domestic workers reside in this settlement and work in nearby residential apartments, colonies and bungalows. Women domestic workers selected the meeting time and venue, an empty house in the locality. Many came to the session directly from the homes they work in as part time domestic workers. Some of the participants have also attended previously held meetings on the issue under this project, during which they said they speak about topics such as “kaam ki jagah pe dikkat” (problems at workplace) “agar kaam pe koi pareshani ati hai toh hum baat kar sakte hai”(if we face any trouble at our workplace then we can come and talk about it) and “yaun utpeedan” (sexual harassment). They had already to an extent begun speaking to one another about the issue and challenge of sexual harassment in their own contexts. They expressed relief at being able to speak openly about the issue among themselves, as the fear of speaking about it to anyone else looms large in their lives. The focus of the session therefore, was what women domestic workers can do to seek support and justice for their experiences of sexual harassment.

Insights

Participants shared that although they know that sexual harassment is wrong and illegal, they were still prone to ignoring it because of their economic and social vulnerabilities, backlash from their families and communities, and the fear of losing their incomes. However, learning about the law and its provisions was something they were deeply interested in.
A participant shared -

“Aisa kitni baar hua hai ki mere kaam ke raaste pe jab mai jaa rhi hoti hun, ladka log peecha karte hai bike se aur phir jab mai karyasthal pohochne wali hoti hun woh ghumake raasta badal lete hai” (This has happened so many times with me; when I walk to go to my place of work, men follow me on their bikes and only turn away when I’m just about to reach my employers’ home)

Another participant shared -

“Mai ek raat ko der tak kaam kar rahi thi. Mera malik baar baar zyada kaam de raha tha taki mai zyada der tak ruk jaun. Usne yeh bhi bola ki aake mere saath TV dekhle. Maine mana ki diya aur apna kaam khatam karke wapas aa gayi” (I was working late at night one day. My employer was continuously giving me extra work to make me stay longer. He even asked me to come and watch television with him. I said no, finished my work and left for home)

Through discussions on case studies based on lived realities of women domestic workers, the participants were able to recall from their own experiences and conclude that quid pro quo situations are very common in their lives, and they are extremely vulnerable to such harassment.

Another discussion they held was whether the gender of their harasser really matters. Participants reflected on the fact that if their job description does not include giving massages to employers, then they shouldn't be asked to give massages, regardless of whether it is for a woman or a man.
Upon learning about the functioning and mechanisms of the Local Committee, participants also reflected that such committees are invisible - not a single one of them had been able to approach this Committee to seek justice for their experiences.

They also spoke about the opening of an illegal liquor shop in the community, which causes women and girls of the community to feel a lot of fear. Men and boys in the community sit together in large groups outside the shop and sexually harass women while they travel to and back from their work. A young domestic worker shared that she was forced to stop taking that path to her workplace completely because she was so afraid.

Learning about the law and mechanisms motivated participants to think more about how these mechanisms could be activated and made available to them. Participants also reflected on the fact that their individual and collective silence around the issue must be broken, and such spaces for speaking openly about the issue and supporting one another to feel safe and empowered to speak is essential.