

“Mai jiske ghar mein kaam karti thi, woh mere saath cher chaar karte the, aur raat ko 1 AM tak kaam karate the, jiske baad mujhe andhere mein wapis ghar aana parta tha ”

(I used to be sexually harassed by my employer, who would make me work till 1 AM sometimes, after which I would have to come back home alone in the dark)

Women domestic workers in Chandra Vihar conduct a Participatory Safety Audit of their community and mark safe and unsafe spaces in their world of work

Date: 16th and 19th February, 2022

Place: Chandra Vihar, West Delhi

Number of participants: 30

Resource Persons: Anita Kapoor

Field Facilitators: Rajni

Introduction

#शैभी is a program that seeks to address the issue of sexual harassment in the world of work of women domestic workers. Led by Martha Farrell Foundation in partnership with UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women and Girls, #शैभी has been developed with and for women domestic workers, to strengthen and build accountable institutional mechanisms that prevent, prohibit and redress cases of sexual harassment. To highlight the issue of lack of safety, women domestic workers in Chandra Vihar, New Delhi took part in a Participatory Safety Audit (PSA) to mark safe and unsafe spaces in their world of work¹.

The PSA was conducted in two separate sessions in Chandra Vihar, to ensure that all aspects of conversations around safety, sexual harassment at workplace, and trust building with domestic workers could be covered. Chandra Vihar is located in West Delhi, and is an urban slum community. Most domestic worker residents of this community are migrants from Bihar, and some also migrated from Uttar Pradesh. In addition to being migrant workers, most participants were from a low socio economic background, and the husbands of a few participants are also employed as garbage collectors.

Through conversations with the participants, it became clear that the women domestic workers in this area were treated unfairly in their workplaces, apart from other issues of safety in their world of work. Lack of paid leaves, low salaries, disrespectful behaviour of employers were some of the reported ways in which women domestic workers experienced their rights being violated.

These experiences were also heightened during the COVID- induced lockdown, when employers were unwilling to allow women domestic workers into their homes, and also did not compensate them for this period; employers also did not call to check in with women domestic workers, making them feel ignored and uncared for in their workplaces, which they help run. Women also reported feeling unsafe in several areas in the community, which are a part of their world of work, and the lack of value and support accorded to them in the workplace added to this feeling of unsafety.

¹ The world of work of domestic workers extends beyond the four walls of their employers' homes, to the entire building complexes, the roads they travel to and back from work, as well as their community settlements, which they share with their colleagues (other domestic workers, drivers, security guards, etc. who work in the same buildings and complexes as them).

The conversations initiated during the Participatory Safety Audit supported women domestic workers in breaking the silence around their experiences of sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual harassment at the workplace. Cultural stigma and shaming of survivors, in addition to economic and financial hardships have been such in the world of work of women domestic workers that they are unable to seek support or even speak up about such experiences in the past.

Methodology

Women domestic workers were initially very hesitant to speak about their experiences of safety or lack of safety, even within their group of peers. To enable them to lead the PSA, the facilitator began with a short discussion about what they understand by safety.



Women domestic workers slowly began sharing, using examples from their personal experiences, what were some of the behaviours and instances that made them feel unsafe. The silence around the issue broke, as more women took cues from one another to begin speaking about their experiences.

Through these exchanges, it became clear that women were experiencing sexual harassment, but were not aware of what this entailed, or what the redressal mechanisms for the same were, under the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act (2013). As the PSA is a

process in which input and output go hand-in-hand, the facilitator contextualised the experiences of women domestic workers against definitions of sexual harassment, its forms and types, and what constitutes a workplace, as per the 2013 Act. Community spaces, commuting spaces, and public spaces that women domestic workers occupy were emphasised as being a part of their world of work.

The Facilitator then supported the women domestic workers to lead a Transect Walk across their community, to add to the list of challenges to safety in the community that they had already spoken about. After the Walk, participants used their experiences to create a Participatory Safety Map of their communities. Each area of the community was plotted on the map, labeled, and participants elaborated on how and where they are used to commuting or occupying.

Using differently coloured *bindis* (stickers), participants then marked the spaces they used in their community as 'safe' and 'unsafe' - green for safe and red for unsafe.



Highlights

Participants learned about the concept of their 'world of work' from the initial discussion around safety and the 2013 Act, which includes not just the homes in which they work in, but also the routes they travel to work, community settlements, building and society spaces, among other spaces.

Women learned the process of map-making through the PSA, an unfamiliar and unknown experience. For most women domestic workers, it was also their first time drawing and writing about their community and situating their homes on a map.

The challenge of lack of community toilets emerged as a key challenge to women's safety in the world of work. Many women from the settlement use the forest area behind the community to relieve themselves. The few community toilets that are built in the community are shared at a ratio of one community toilet to ten households, leaving women with no option but to use public spaces due to lack of time and cleanliness in the toilets.

The forest area is open, and women expressed that community men stare at them and sexually harass them when they relieved themselves in the open, leaving them scared and numb.

Box 1: Woman domestic worker Sabita (name changed) shares her fears of living in the Chandra Vihar settlement

"Hum jab jangal mein jaate the, toh mard aate the, apne private part ko nikalte the aur hilate the"
(when we used to relieve ourselves in the jungle, men would come and show us their penises, and would sometimes also masturbate)

Women also expressed that commuting to and from work was an extremely unsafe experience for them. The dark lanes in the *basti* are spaces where women domestic workers have experienced being groped and sexually harassed in other ways as well. Participants believed that they could not use these lanes to commute to work after sundown, or alone at any point as they felt that they might be trafficked, kidnapped, and raped. The situation is so precarious, that a few women domestic workers have also had to shift houses to locations that are not in this area to avoid being sexually harassed. Lack of lighting emerged as a key reason for exacerbated challenges to safety.

Domestic workers also marked the homes they worked in as unsafe. Participants shared their experiences of being sexually harassed by their employers, and that speaking up about their experiences was also of no use. They would either lose their jobs, and/or not be believed when they shared their experiences.

Box 2: Domestic worker Reshma (name changed) recounts an experience of being sexually harassed at her workplace, and the stigma attached to the same

"Mai jab nayi nayi Dilli aayi thi, toh mere saas ne mujhe kaam pe laga diya. Waha unhone mere saat bohaut bura kiya. Koi mujhe vishwaas nahi karte agar mai unko batati, to mai ghar se bhaag gayi thi." (When I first came to Delhi, my mother-in-law made me work as a domestic worker. My employers sexually harassed me, but nobody would believe me if I told them this. So, I ran away after a while)

Through the safety map, which had several more red bindis than green, it became apparent that sexual harassment in the world of work of domestic workers in Chandra Vihar was a very common experience for women domestic workers.

Participants reflected on what had been said during the session and how it has improved their awareness of the issues of safety and countering sexual harassment in their world of work.

Box 3: Domestic worker Sapna (name changed) reflected:

“Humein aise session aur chahiye, kyuki humaare saath jo bhi hua, woh kisi aur ke saath nahi hona chahiye— khas kar humaare betiyo ko” (We need more sessions like this one. What happened to us should never happen to others—especially our daughters)

Recommendations

- Women domestic workers expressed the need for a fully covered community toilet and bathroom, to ensure privacy. This was also considered a necessity to ensure that women would not need to use public spaces such as forested areas to relieve themselves— places believed to be highly unsafe
- Proper street lighting was also considered to be a necessity, as the routes taken to and from work were considered unsafe after sundown
- Rent controlled houses were also an expectation from all participants. Due to the high rent of houses in the basti, many women domestic workers have started to shift to an area of settlement near the drain (which is relatively cheaper). This is considered problematic by women domestic workers and their families, many of whom have also reported falling ill due to the poor hygienic conditions.

Reflections

- Low and differing levels of literacy among participants is a key barrier for community-led research by women domestic workers in Chandra Vihar. However, the participatory Map-Making exercise, Transect Walk and focus group discussion transcended the barriers of illiteracy, allowing every participant to contribute to research, problem mapping and solution building to the issue of safety in the world of work of women domestic workers in the community
- Domestic workers were initially hesitant to contextualise their experiences of sexual harassment as that which is happening in their ‘workplace’, as many don’t think of themselves as workers. However, through collective discussion and continuous input from the facilitator, domestic workers began identifying themselves as workers, and understanding their rights to safe workplaces under the law
- Despite their inclusion in the 2013 Act, women domestic workers of Chandra Vihar were unaware of the Act, their rights and key concepts under the law. This also signifies that authorities responsible for awareness generation about the Law (a legal mandate) have no reach or penetration into this community, a key area of improvement through community-led advocacy
- Providing women domestic workers with a safe and conducive environment to speak about their challenges and build solutions together gave them a lot of confidence in their own ability to voice their concerns and work together towards impacting change