“Tu bolegi, muh kholegi, toh inka zamana badlega (By speaking up, we can change the world)”

Women domestic workers in Gautampuri stand in solidarity to counter sexual harassment in their world of work

Date: 27th August 2021
Place: Gautampuri, North East Delhi
Number of participants: 70
Field Facilitator: Gudiya
Resource Persons: Anita and MFF Program Staff

Introduction

With #मोको, women domestic workers in eleven districts of Delhi and two districts of Haryana are coming together in partnership with Martha Farrell Foundation and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls, to counter sexual harassment in their world of work and to advocate and effect a sensitive, proactive institutional mechanism to redress complaints of such experiences in the workplace.

As a first step towards this effort, 70 women domestic workers met in Gautampuri, a session attended and facilitated by MFF Program Staff, field animator Gudiya and external resource person Anita Kapoor, founder of Shehri Mahila Kamgar Union and member of the Network for the Rights and Voices of Domestic Workers, Delhi - NCR.

Highlights from the Conversation

The conversation began with a discussion on sexual harassment, and its multiple forms and types. 10 women domestic workers from the group voluntarily shared that they had experienced some form or type of sexual harassment at their workplaces. The culture of
stigma and silence around the issue was so powerful that many women were initially hesitant to even mention these instances.

**Box 1: Rekha (name changed), a domestic worker from Gautampuri, shares her experience**

I used to work at a kothi and my employer was a father of two. He would constantly make inappropriate comments and look at me inappropriately. Other domestic workers also knew of his behaviour. I finally broke my silence one day and told him that everyone knows of his “gandi” (bad) habits outside.

For many women in the group, such experiences had been normalised to such an extent that realising that they had been violated in multiple instances shocked them to the point of silence.

![Women domestic workers sharing their experiences of sexual harassment at workplace](image)

Through the session, the field facilitator and MFF program staff gently probed into the discussion by sharing their own experiences, their questions and learnings from conversations in other bastis (communities). Slowly, emboldened by the women who had already shared such experiences in the session, more women in the group began speaking up.

**Box 2: Neelima (name changed), a domestic worker from Gautampuri, shares her experience**

I came to Delhi from Bengal. I was working in one house, where I used to do the cleaning work. While cleaning, it became a regular practice for my employer (a man) to pull on my pallu (a part of the traditional Indian sari). I was new to the city, and I got very scared. I was not aware of any legal processes that may have helped me counter what I was going through. Who
would listen to me? With a lot of courage, I eventually told my husband. Without a second thought, he just made me quit my work in that house.

The women’s stories were often at intersection with other forms of discrimination and harassment that they faced in their world of work, including discrimination faced by women of religious minorities. A woman shared that her religion was often a barrier to her ability to find a job in upper class societies. Multiple women said they’d changed their names to be able to find jobs.

Box 3: Singing songs of resistance and solidarity
During the conversation, a key tool for emboldening and uniting the 70 women under the common cause was music. Women sat together and began the session with songs of resistance and solidarity:

“Isiliye raha sangharsh hum chunein, zindagi aasuon mei nahayi na ho, shaam sehmi na ho, raat ho na darri.” (We have chosen the path of struggle so that our lives are not full of tears, our evenings and nights are not full of fear).

“Tu bolegi moo kholegi toh inko zamana badlega. Tu chup rehkar yeh sehti rahi toh kya yeh zamana badlega? Dariya ki kasam, maujo ki kasam yeh tana-bana badlega.” (If you speak up, the world will change them. If you stay quiet and suffer, will the world change? I swear on the river and its waves that this weave will change).

The women were also shown three fictional stories of instances of sexual harassment in the workplace. Each group was asked to discuss these instances and analyse whether what was happening in the situations was alright or not. Through the discussions, the women began discussing rights and the need for legal mechanisms to complain about such instances. The empathy that women felt for the women in the stories set the tone for the final segment of the conversation: the need to work together to advocate for safer, equitable and conducive workplaces.
Key Learnings

- Experiences of sexual harassment at workplace faced by women domestic workers have not come to the fore even though there’s a Law that protects them. At the same time, the experiences are many and varied, leaving millions of women extremely vulnerable in the workplace.
- While women domestic workers may not be aware of the terminology and language around sexual harassment, they are keenly aware of facing violations in the workplace. The silence around the issue has little to do with the lack of recognition of it, and more to do with the lack of institutional mechanisms available to counter it.
- Songs, poetry and other art forms are critical forms of art that unify and bring a feeling of strength and solidarity among the women.
- There are foreseeable challenges to conducting a traditional baseline survey among women domestic workers around the issue.
- There is no awareness among the women domestic workers of Gautampuri of an eight year old Law that protects their rights.

Next Steps

- Women domestic workers in Gautampuri will coordinate and conduct a participatory baseline survey to gauge the level of awareness about sexual harassment at workplace, experiences of safety/unsafety and their awareness about the Law.
- The baseline survey will inform the next steps for advocacy with local government and stakeholders to strengthen the implementation of the Law and hold institutions accountable to the unique needs of women domestic workers.
• The women domestic workers will continue to meet and support one another building on this conversation and growing their community of solidarity and support