“Mai kaam wali hun aur mehnat kari hun (I am a worker, and I work hard)”

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

Date: 24th September 2021
Place: Mukherjee Nagar, North Delhi
Number of participants: 100
Field Facilitator: Bibiyana Lakra
Resource Persons: Anita and MFF Program Staff

Introduction

100 Women domestic workers of Mukherjee Nagar met to discuss the challenges they face in their world of work. The session was held to initiate conversations on the issue of workplace challenges with women domestic workers and strengthen solidarity and support to counter sexual harassment in their world of work.

The session was attended and facilitated by MFF Program Staff, field animator Bibiyana Lakra 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. The field facilitators used the ‘nukkad naatak (play)’ form of art and expression to initiate the conversation, and acted out different instances of sexual harassment at workplace. The culture of stigma and silence around the issue was so powerful that many women were initially hesitant to even mention their experiences. The
introductory art-based form of expression encouraged participants to break their silence.

**Box 1: Sarita (name changed), a domestic worker from Mukherjee Nagar shares her experience**

*I used to go to collect firewood near my house. One day, I saw a man standing on his bike and staring at me and my friend. We were afraid that he was going to come near us. He started touching himself right after.*

For many women in the group, such experiences are a part of daily routine. A compounding challenge was that the community toilets were outside their homes. They expressed that experiences of sexual harassment while relieving themselves is a regular issue. Consequently, sexual harassment is so prevalent, that every woman in the group related to Sarita’s narrative.

**Box 2: Neelam (name changed), a domestic worker from Mukherjee Nagar, shares her experience**

*On my way to work, a young boy used to follow me first and then move ahead. He used to look*
at me while urinating in a corner of the street. I got so frustrated after a few days that I stopped a lady to ask for help. She encouraged me to pick up a brick and confront him. With her support, I did it. He does not follow me anymore.

The experience of being followed on the way to work and back was another common factor among the women. Some of them also pointed out that men in big cars would stop their vehicles near them, or touch themselves inappropriately, while driving by. Discussions on real life experiences of sexual harassment by fellow women domestic workers and the field facilitators motivated participants who were hesitant in the beginning of the session to come forward and break their silence, which was very empowering, especially for those who felt misplaced shame around such incidents.

The women domestic workers were then told about Indian law to protect them from sexual harassment at the workplace (SHW Act, 2013), and a conversation began to focus on the need for them 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
- There are foreseeable challenges to conducting a traditional baseline survey among women domestic workers around the issue, however, such sessions are helping devise strategies and tactics to conduct them for the data collection
- There is no awareness among the women domestic workers of Mukherjee Nagar of an eight year old Law that protects their rights

Next Steps

- Women domestic workers in Mukherjee Nagar 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