

“Hum chahte hai ki hum apne ghar aur kaam ki jagah pe surakshit rahein, aur iske liye hum aap ka sahyog chahte hain (We want to feel safe in our homes and our workplaces and we need your support to make this a reality)”

Women domestic workers discuss safety in their world of work with the Chairperson of the State Commission for Women, Haryana

The issue of sexual harassment in the workplace experienced by women domestic workers is very little spoken of. While on the one hand, layered challenges of social, economic and cultural marginalization and disempowerment of women domestic workers seal their silence on such experiences; on the other hand, improper access to justice and gaps in implementation of laws to ensure safety of women in the workplace further compound the silence around the issue.

Sexual harassment of women in the workplace is considered to be a gross violation of one's fundamental and human rights, and a key issue that prevents women's equal participation in the labour workforce.

With #मैंभी, a program led by women domestic workers of Delhi-NCR and Martha Farrell Foundation, supported by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women and Girls, women domestic workers have begun to slowly break their silence on the issue, their own experiences of workplace sexual harassment and challenge the notion that lack of reporting of such cases implies that the issue itself doesn't exist. Using community-led research findings and advocacy initiatives, women domestic workers are seeking to work with institutions to strengthen mechanisms under the 2013 Act to protect women from sexual harassment in the workplace.

In the period between August 2021 - March 2022, women domestic workers undertook a participatory study with 1939 of their peers and counterparts across 13 districts of Delhi-NCR to collectively articulate the issue of safety in their world of work and challenges to accessing justice. The study used a mix-methodology approach to understanding the layered challenges to safety in the world of work experienced by women domestic workers. A mobile-based survey was administered to collect objective data. In conjunction with the survey, women domestic workers undertook Transect Walks, prepared participatory safety maps of their communities, highlighting challenges to safety in their world of work¹. Further, Focus Group Discussions, art-based methodologies and Listening Circles have been leveraged for anecdotal evidence building and sharing by women domestic workers.

The power of community based participatory methodologies is such that 1939 participants have all said they experienced sexual harassment in their world of work - experiences they had not spoken about or admitted even to their own families in the past. The study is the largest of its kind that documents experiences of women domestic workers in India, and each document created by women domestic workers (the study itself, the Participatory Safety Maps and the *sari* on which women domestic workers stitched their experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace), forms a part of the only repository of information containing survivor-centered, trauma-informed data available on the issue.

Women are also learning how to use this data to be able to advocate with stakeholders, government and decision makers to strengthen mechanisms to prevent, prohibit such instances and experiences and ensure time-bound justice delivery for survivors. To be able to do this effectively, women domestic workers have been attending participatory training sessions to understand the provisions and processes, and definitions under the 2013 Act to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace for both formal and informal workers. The Act specifically includes women domestic workers in its purview, although the procedures for accessing redressal for them is ambiguous.

¹ World of Work is understood to be inclusive of any area or place that a worker crosses to be able to reach their workplaces. The definition in the context of women domestic workers, pertains to their communities, the way that they take to their workplaces and any other place, house, city they visit for the purpose of carrying out their duties.

Using their findings and learnings, domestic workers in Faridabad and Gurgaon (Haryana) sought a meeting with the Chairperson of the Haryana State Commission for Women, to discuss and strategize solutions to strengthen the implementation of the Act together. With MFF's support, women domestic workers were able to secure a meeting.



Women domestic workers of Haryana presenting Participatory Safety Map

The State Commission for Women is a body under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, which is also the governing body under which law preventing sexual harassment of women at workplace was passed. Given that the State Commission for Women forms a part of the nodal department under this Act and can take steps to ensure its effective implementation, women domestic workers presented key findings from their participatory study on the experiences of sexual harassment in the world of work of women domestic workers in Faridabad and Gurgaon. They presented their Participatory Safety Maps of two communities - Harijan Basti in Gurgaon and Gadakhori Basti in Faridabad. Additionally, women domestic workers also presented the *sari* (traditional Indian garment) on which they had stitched their experiences of sexual harassment in the world of work.

Using these three documents prepared by the women themselves, women domestic workers laid down the challenges to the implementation of the Act in the two communities and their recommendations to strengthen their safety in the world of work.

Key Challenges and Recommendations for the Safety of Women Domestic Workers in the World of Work and their Recommendations to Tackle these Challenges

Challenges	Recommendations
The workplace is not safe for us. From our study of 1939 women domestic workers in India, we have found out that 74% of us have experienced sexual harassment in our direct workplace, that is, the employer's home.	Sensitisation and awareness generation among employers, not only about the Act, but also their roles and responsibilities towards our safety is essential. Although the Act mandates it, this is something we have never seen being implemented.

<p>According to the Law, employers are responsible for our safety. However, even they are not aware of the Act.</p>	
<p>We experience sexual harassment on our way to work and back. Sometimes, we are made to work late into the evening and the risk of sexual violence increases. Under the Law, every woman is protected in places that she visits in relation to her work. However, we have no means of seeking justice because very few of us are aware of the Local Committee mechanism, and hardly any of us are easily able to access it. When we go to the police, they don't believe us.</p>	<p>Districts where Local Committees aren't formed must form them. Every Local Committee must be mandatorily trained to put in place mechanisms that make them accessible to us - all of us, including those of us who can not travel far, who can not read or write, or who have no access to digital devices. Appointment of Nodal Officers is an essential part of this.</p> <p>There must be regular police patrolling on roads and fixing street lights for our safety.</p> <p>Police should be sensitised and made aware of our challenges, and it must be ensured that they don't harass us when we try to file complaints.</p> <p>Employers must take responsibility for our safety while travelling to and back from work, especially on those days when they make us work over time, or late into the night. Accountability needs to be ensured.</p>
<p>Our community spaces are generally small and cramped, and we share these spaces with our colleagues - people who work as gardeners, drivers, security guards, pet walkers, etc. in the same housing societies and for the same families that we work for.</p> <p>Within these community spaces, sexual harassment is rampant, and mostly perpetrated by our colleagues. Some of us can not move out of our homes, or let our children out at night - even to relieve themselves or fetch water, because we fear kidnap and sexual assault.</p> <p>Our communities are not well-lit or well patrolled, and so there is a lot of impunity with which violence is inflicted on women and girls in particular.</p>	<p>Our community spaces need to be made more safe with the inclusion of street lights and regular police patrolling.</p> <p>On our community maps, we've highlighted those areas that are particularly dangerous and need infrastructure and personnel support.</p> <p>We should not have to fear stepping out of our home.</p>
<p>Our vulnerability to violence in the workplace is also compounded by the violence we face in our homes.</p> <p>Many of us are too scared to even talk about domestic violence and domestic sexual violence. But in the aftermath of the pandemic, such instances have risen in our communities.</p> <p>Those among us who wish to seek justice and support are also very afraid of approaching authorities. We are afraid we will not be</p>	<p>We need sensitive personnel among police who will take our complaints seriously. They should be able to ensure anonymity and sensitivity to our needs and prioritise our safety while acting on our complaints. Justice delivery processes shouldn't compromise our safety further.</p>

<p>believed, we are afraid we will be forced to return home, back to the perpetrators, and the situation will be worse than before.</p>	
<p>In our <i>basti</i> in Faridabad, the only access to water that we have is a nearby well. Women and girls have to go there to fetch water for our families. It is a very lonely area and we are all at risk of sexual harassment there.</p>	<p>Resources such as water shouldn't come at the cost of one's safety. Police patrolling adequate lighting and easier access to water is essential for us.</p>
<p>As a young girl, I was kidnapped by a placement agency and placed in a house in Delhi for domestic work. Not having a proper childhood, or any idea about my roots and identity has been very difficult for me. Even today, I'm married to a man who is addicted to alcohol and physically abuses me in our home.</p>	<p>We have strict anti-trafficking laws and laws for the prevention of child labour. However, both these situations are a harsh reality. Implementation of both laws, monitoring of borders and disbanding of these unregulated 'agencies' must be made a priority, for girls like me to not lose our childhoods.</p>



Chairperson of the State Commission of Women, Haryana looking at Saree prepared by women domestic workers with their experiences of sexual harassment at workplace stitched on it

Response by the Chairperson of the Haryana State Commission for Women

The Chairperson promised to take action to ensure the formation and sensitisation of Local Committees in Gurgaon and Faridabad and the rest of the state of Haryana. Further, she promised to work with the police to make patrolling more stringent. She also briefed the women domestic workers about how to use the Durga Shakti safety App. In solidarity with the women, the Chairperson requested a written report on the challenges and recommendations that the women's community-based participatory research has produced. As a way forward, women domestic workers have prepared the report and submitted it to their local police station in Gurgaon.