

SWABHIMAAN KENDRA

A space for sharing,
sisterhood and solidarity



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SWABHIMAAN KENDRA: EK JAGAH, MERI APNI

A year back, Sarita moved to Gurgaon from her village in Uttar Pradesh in search of a better life than what her village had to offer. She still remembers, how, sitting on the top of a truck, clutching her meagre possessions, she had dreamt of building a new life in this large city, which promised a chance to do so. And yet, one year later, life just seemed to have become tougher. She had been lucky to find a job in one of the flats of the high rises that her slum was close to. Initially, it had been difficult, getting used to the ways and requirements of her employers. Her employers had been kind; her fate had been better than some of the other horror stories that she had heard from her friends—of workers being beaten up and thrown out. But her day-to-day survival was such a struggle. Starting from the fight for water, a clean place to live in, the small, congested place where she lived, which became an oven during summers, the scrounging to put away some savings from her and her husband's meager earnings, the fear of walking down the road to and from her place of work, the list could go on and on. And in all this, her husband had changed, into someone she no longer recognized. Frustrated and helpless, he had taken to drinking and beat her up whenever he came back home from work. Sarita longed for her simpler, open life in her village. But the cooing of her little daughter in her lap reminded her why she had come to the city and why she could not leave it. Come what may.

This is the story of Sarita. A domestic worker living in one of the slums of Gurgaon. However, this is not particular to only her. This story has a name. There are countless others, nameless and unowned.

Because this is the reality of our world. A parallel reality that exists under the shine and sparkle of large cities. Large cities are home also to millions of migrant workers who come here, trying to rewrite their destinies. Living on the margins, each day, is a struggle. Yet, they stay. And dream.

An estimated 400 million people work in the informal sector in India. They make up the workforce in several sectors in the country, like infrastructure development, manufacturing, and others. And a large percentage of them work as domestic workers in cities like Delhi. Placed officially by the government at an estimated 4.75 million workers, domestic workers in India form a significant proportion of this workforce.



While most of these large cities are far more expensive than the towns and villages that they come from, they still live in its shadows, invisible and undocumented. Since there is not enough comprehensive data on domestic workers, support and services more often than not, do not reach them. They remain unreached, uninformed and unaddressed. Mostly these domestic workers are migrants and more often than not, lack identity proofs. This prevents their accessing government sponsored schemes and programs. This, of course, does not even begin to scratch at the discrimination, exploitation and abuse that these domestic workers are vulnerable to, at their work places as well as in their homes. Their employment in people's homes, which are considered 'private spaces,' excludes them from being protected by labour laws. Lack of regulation around their employment means that they are constantly exposed to economic, social and physical harassment in the hands of their employers with no or little bargaining power.

Their condition at home is not any better. Despite being equal, if not sometimes the sole bread winners for their families, their status within the family, is a gendered lower status, with no respect in the relationship. They are at the receiving end of abuse, physical, emotional, economic within their homes. All these factors have always greatly increased their vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence, at their workplace, in their homes and even on the streets.



And then, the pandemic hit the world, increasing the vulnerability of these women. A large number of these women lost their jobs, in many cases, the only source of income for the family. Inability to pay rent made losing their home, a fearful possibility. Congested living made essential social distancing and hygiene difficult to achieve. Fear, anxieties, with respect to the disease, were exacerbated by lack of information and access to essential commodities. Frustrations led to increased violence and the home became less of a refuge and more of a prison.

Sarita is an animator in the Harijan Basti in Gurgaon. Her narration of her experience, from when she began till today, tells a tale of the journey that these women have been able to achieve. In terms of their own sense of self, in terms of what is important to them. She still remembers how it was when the project began – when she would approach women in their homes, to ascertain their needs and requirements, and if the woman's husband or son was at home, the woman would try and skulk out of the house, so as to not have to meet and talk to Sarita. The women would live in constant oppression and fear, not wanting to attract more ire of their husbands, by talking about their aspirations and needs to Sarita. Men would also drive Sarita away, questioning her as to why she wanted to speak with their women folk, saying that they did not want to speak with her.



those days were difficult for her, for she also, like the other women there, used to live in fear and apprehension, choosing to become invisible for fear of being picked out for harassment and abuse. Like she says, till then, whichever male figure she had ever interacted with, had always had viewed her through questionable intentions. She had wanted to study, had studied till class 7, but marriage had put paid to her dreams. Her desire to work for the good of others, pulled her into the project. And gradually, her own straightforward strength, her desire to help others, her courage made her succeed in her work. She was identified to conduct the first needs assessment survey in her locality, in order to identify what the women there needed.

Sapne Mere, Bhavishya Mera, an initiative of PRIA in association with Martha Farrell Foundation, had emerged out of this survey. This project had been initiated to set up a Resource and Support Centre for women in Harijan Basti, an informal urban settlement in the city of Gurugram, Haryana, India, demanded by the Needs Assessment Survey y. That Centre had been envisaged as a safe space for women and their adolescent girl children to not just access information on government scheme and programs but one in which they could find the freedom and trust to express themselves as they desired. It was envisioned as a space that would empower the women with voice and agency to handle challenges, not just individually but also collectively. This was also an attempt to collectivise the women domestic workers, bringing their voices together on a platform which the women designed themselves. This project started in January 2021, which lasted for one year, gave the women domestic workers their first experience of collectivised strength. They conducted and participated in a Transect Walk, going to areas many had never been to before, also identifying spots which were unsafe for women. Visualisation workshops helped them to verbalise and express their concerns and aspirations, an exercise they had never indulged in before. Hearing the similarity of the stories that the women had to share, brought the women together, in understanding and solidarity. Sexual violence, gender, sense of self, safe space, all these entered the women's conversations. Workshops on the Right to Information, on Labour Laws, empowered the women with information regarding their rights as domestic workers. The project also implemented exercises to introduce the women to alternate sources of income, so that they could explore better employment opportunities and learn new skills. This project allowed women to form a group that could support each other, enable each other to express their deepest fears and aspirations.



When the project ended after a year, the safe space that the Resource and Support Centre had provided to the women, had to be sustained. A space that women recognised as their own, free from sexual and gender violence, where women could be heard, seen, recognised by each other, had become a necessity. Even more so in the second wave of the pandemic, when women needed a space they could escape to, from the violence in their homes. A space which was clean, hygienic, comfortable and most importantly, safe and secure, a space which allowed them to escape from the rigours of their reality, even if briefly. The next project realised the importance of ensuring the creation of this safe space, a refuge for the women and adolescent girls of the community, when faced with the escalated domestic and intimate partner violence and the workplace violence, intensified further by the ravages of COVID and the loss of livelihood.

After the first wave of the pandemic, there was a slight relaxation when the world went back to some version of normalcy. Most of the women domestic workers had lost their jobs in the first wave. Inability to access vaccines, or hygienic spaces, meant that they were looked at with suspicion by those who could hire them. even after the first wave got over, most of these women domestic workers did not get their jobs back. Those who did, had to settle for pay far less than what they had been earning.

And then the second wave of the pandemic hit. Whatever hopes had arisen out of the easing of restrictions promptly turned to dust. Every possible fear came to rest in the hearts of all. The world turned into itself, locking out all. Those who could, stayed in. Those who could not, stayed torn. Workplaces shrunk, as did their spaces at home. Again.



Martha Farrell foundation conducted a survey with 4463 domestic workers and their adolescent children in Delhi – NCR during the second wave of the pandemic (April – June 2021) and found that:

- **76 per cent of domestic workers had lost their jobs and had no other source of income.**
- **Those who could find work, had incomes reduced to 1/4th of what they had been earning before.**
- **Inability to pay their bills, rents and having to take loans for survival, exposed them to harassment, including sexual harassment.**
- **Inability to access government schemes and provisions while facing shortages in essentials brought families to points of starvation**
- **Congested areas, shared toilet spaces, etc made hygiene and social distancing impossible**
- **Mental health was frayed and unaddressed**

In response to these findings, and in partnership with women domestic workers, the Martha Farrell Foundation, with the support of DSP Investment Managers Pvt Ltd, designed a unique holistic program for women domestic workers and their children, especially girls, while keeping the needs and requirements arising out of the lived experiences of the women and children in the aftermath of the devastating pandemic, at the center. This program—Meri Abhilasha: Reclaiming Voice, Agency, Space—sought to establish a robust and sustainable model of recovery and development, through the creation and sustenance of safe physical spaces that the women could access. The spaces were co- designed and codeveloped by the women of the community to end discrimination and gender-based violence, advance the right of women and

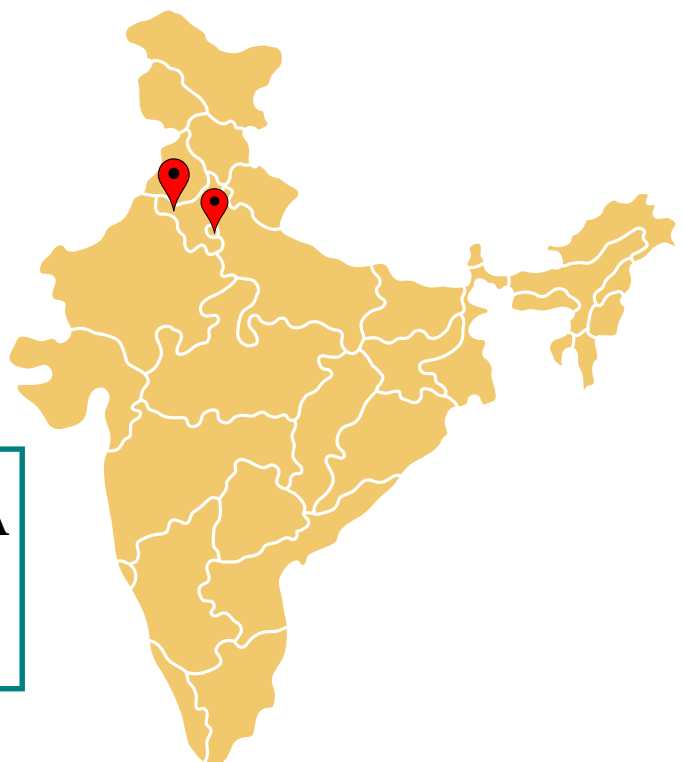
adolescents and facilitate the empowerment of women and girls. It provided them a space where they could access to learn, plan and work together in. Spaces that might not even have been there before the pandemic, but which definitely shrank and reduced due to the pandemic.

In a first-of-its-kind initiative, two Resource and Support Centers were set up in Gautampuri, Delhi and Harijan Basti, Gurgaon. Named “Swabhiman Kendra”, a “center where I build my self respect” by the women and girls themselves, this space took on many identities. The day-to-day functioning of the Centers are overseen by field facilitators selected by women domestic workers from among their community members.

The aim of the centres, when they came up, was to:

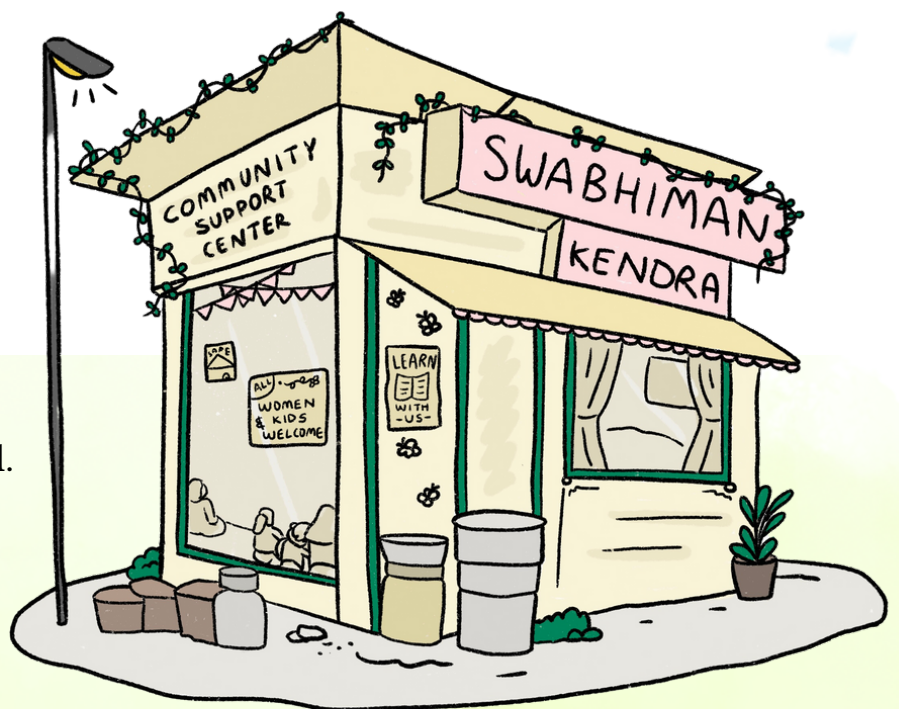
1. Provide a safe learning space to women domestic workers to mitigate exacerbated challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic faced by them and their families.
2. Provide access to information about health-related services to minimize the challenges faced during the pandemic
3. Provide access to entitlements and services as citizens, workers and women.
4. Enable young girls to pursue and continue education
5. Build linkages of women domestic workers with governance systems for protection and redressal of sexual harassment at work and domestic violence
6. Build capacities of women domestic workers with skills and knowledge and build enabling environments within the home and the community to exercise leadership and decision making.

The centres initially came up in the Bichpadi village in Panipat and the Harijan Basti in Gurgaon. The Bichpadi village in Panipat is a small clustered village located on the outskirts of Panipat's posh residential area. The population here is mostly local while 20 per cent are migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The women of the household work as domestic workers in the nearby residences. The harijan basti in Gurgaon is a clustered settlement in the heart of Gurgaon's posh Sector 42. Most of the households in this cluster are also of migrants and the women of the household here too, work as domestic workers in the nearby high rises. A third center was set up in Gautampuri, located in Shahadra. It has an estimated population of 1 lakh. It is estimated that 15000 families, largely migrants from North Indian states, live in the settlement.



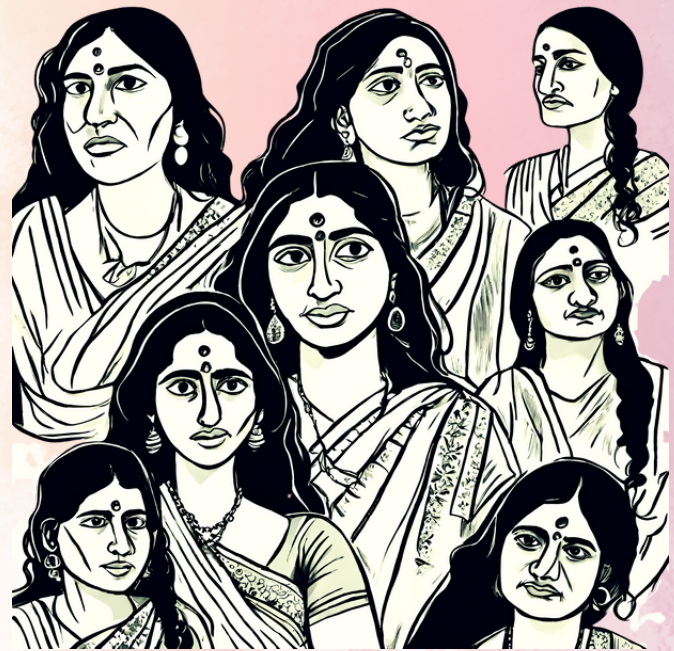
Despite the disparity in the location of the three centers, commonalities mark the communities in all three places. All three areas are more or less considered 'unauthorised colonies' and receive very little or no attention from the authorities. Therefore, the inhabitants of these areas face challenges of safety, poor sanitation, healthcare, hygiene, and education, among others. Lack of safety, high crime rates, lack of schools and affordable healthcare, water, and sanitation issues have severe impacts on the well-being and development of residents of these areas. Especially the women. Almost all women in these communities work as domestic workers in the residences or high rises near the settlements. All the women in all three communities were waging daily wars, alone and resolute. Wars against sexual and gender-based violence, wars against their fractured senses of self, wars against their destiny seemingly swallowing them and their children up whole. Wars against the other. Wars against their own.

Once the centres came up, they provided the women a space where they could get together, think, plan and organise activities to achieve their aspirations and dreams. The women saw this as a space where they could map out ways to work with each other and with other members of the community to support and empower women domestic workers and their children in the community spaces. and above all work to counter and eliminate gender-based violence in all its forms in their lives. Based on their plans, the Martha Farrell Foundation facilitated participatory capacity-building sessions to empower them with knowledge and skills to achieve their vision. The women were trained on data collection for needs verification, on using a mobile-based survey methodology, on research ethics. While there was already an established rapport with the community in Gurgaon, through past projects, the community at Panipat needed confidence and trust building, which was done through conversations with the administrative head. The demographic profiling and needs assessment were done through home visits and conversations with the women domestic workers, and these needs were then verified through a survey.



Since these centres were designed keeping the needs, challenges and aspirations of the women domestic workers at the core, the activities conducted in these centres were also planned and designed by the domestic workers themselves, based on the needs assessment surveys, the visioning exercises, the participatory researches, focus group discussions, all of which fed into creating the first of its kind, community-led, trauma-informed intervention, designed to address the concerns and aspirations of the domestic workers of the community.

All the exercises pointed to only one requirement. That, the women wanted a voice. To raise their concerns about the fact that no woman was safe on the streets, in her home, or in her work place. She wanted to be free of the violence that she was habituated to. She wanted to live a life of respect and peace in her home. She wanted her home to be a refuge and not a punishment chamber. She also wanted to be able to work without fear of abuse, harassment and discrimination,

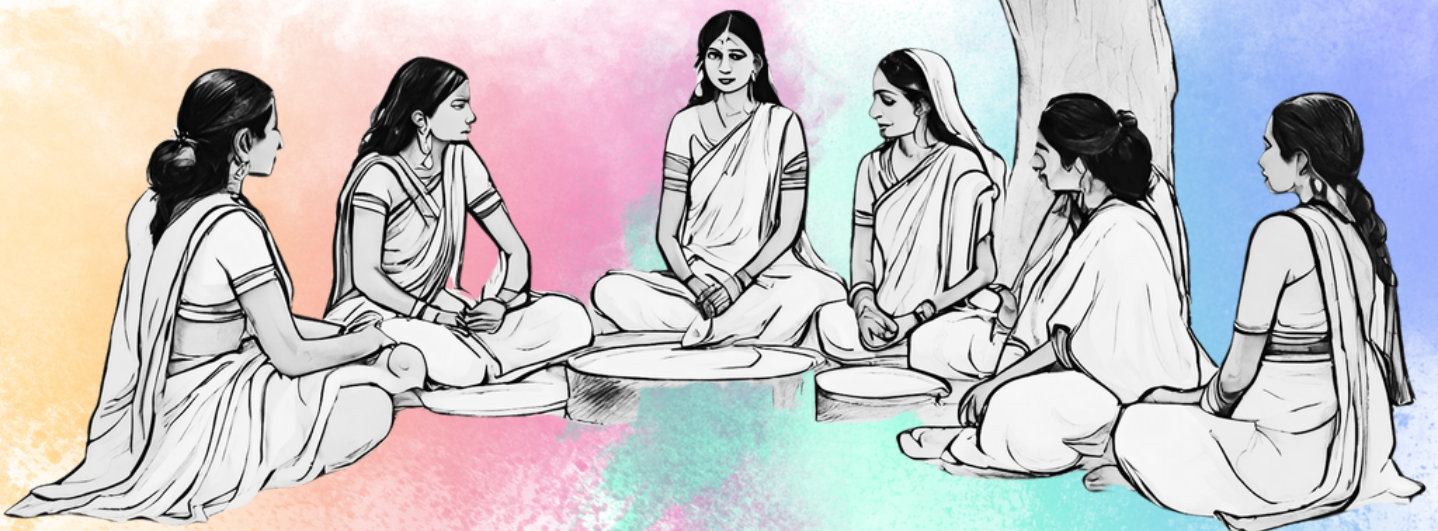


at her workplace. She wanted to raise her voice against the fact that while she would be doing all the work in someone's place, she would be treated as sub-human, not allowed to touch anything, not allowed to use the bathroom or drink water. She wanted protection against harassment by the guards, the housekeeping, etc in the places where she would go to work. She also wanted information and help to realise her full potential, to learn and explore alternate sources of income, other than as a domestic worker. Being able to develop another skill, another source of income, provided her with a bargaining power at her workplace that she severely lacked. Not being in a position to choose alternatives, with pressures of mouths to feed at home, compelled women to continue in their unsafe workplaces. Sometimes this also forced them to even enter into work that society considers incorrect. She also needed platforms and avenues through which her voice could be heard. Voices that were stifled within the walls of the houses where they worked, sometimes sexually and physically abused and oppressed. And stifled also within the walls of the place she called home.

Yet another fact emerged from the initial interactions with the women domestic workers. At almost all interactions, the women would be accompanied by their children. And with each interaction, more and more of the children, especially the adolescent children, became more and more a part of the program. This was a real time course modification which was essential for the program. Adolescents in both locations added layers to the problems put forth by the women. This clearly demonstrated the overlaps between the lives of the women and that of the adolescents. The fears, apprehensions, anxieties had begun to make homes in the hearts and the minds of the young people, who were desperately hoping that their lives would be different from that of their mothers. They could feel the oppressive shroud of self-doubt, a resigned acceptance of status quo, presence of gender and sexual violence beginning to snuff out their hopes and aspirations. This had to be addressed, and the 'Swabhiman Kendra' became ideal spaces to do that as well.

In Panipat, the village chaupal, which was a place for men to sit and play cards and smoke hukkah in, was negotiated for by the women, through several rounds of meetings with the sarpanch and then it was declared as the centre. The women cleaned and painted it, sewed curtains, put up posters on issues that pertained to them, and made the space their own.

In Gurgaon, the women used to meet in Sarita's accommodation. However, when the pandemic hit, especially the second wave, space became crucial and coveted. People's homes could not be accessed, nor was it desirable. Plus, a space was needed to store and disburse the rations and essentials that the women procured through the foundation as well as from the government. That is when they felt the need for a separate space, a room which could house not just the provision, but also their freedom and their desires. This centre enabled them to rally together and lead one of the biggest relief drives led by and for domestic workers. The centres became information hubs as well as venues for multiple activities, workshops and interventions. The centres became their 'safe space.'



SWABHIMAAN KENDRA - JOURNEY TO CREATING SAFE SPACES



The women domestic workers are a resilient lot. Most of them are not from Delhi. Having come from different places, sometimes from very far off and very different cultures, they have decided to make Delhi their homes. Despite the hardships that come with moving to large cities like Delhi, they have chosen to make this city their home, make a place for themselves, find work, sometimes in unsafe and inhospitable conditions, set up their small homes, building a life in the city, learning new ways of living, working, gathering new abilities and survival skills along the way, trying to build a better future for their children and working hard for that, even supporting families back in their home towns or villages. This is not for the faint hearted. And each day they get up, plunge headlong into the business of survival. They are warriors in their own rights. But this confidence takes a beating when they are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence. It compels them to hide, to try and remain unseen, unheard, invisible, undermining their unique selves. This heightened manifold during the pandemic, which led to a sudden loss of income, livelihood, secure home, shattering hopes for the future, plunging them into insecurities and breaking their confidence. They searched for themselves, they searched for their own space.

Safe space has been defined as a place or environment in which a person or a category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment or any other emotional or physical harm. The Swabhimaan Kendras were designed to be just that, for the women domestic workers. Scratching the surface of the needs of the women domestic workers revealed their deep need for togetherness, for a group, a collective, which would listen to their worries and anxieties and be their voice. They needed to be brought together so that they did not feel like they were battling alone. They needed a mechanism, a platform where they could be cajoled and encouraged to open up, and share their stories.... and a place to enable them to do so.

This safe space, first and foremost, reintroduced the women domestic workers to themselves, to their lives, their aspirations, their dreams. It introduced the women to all that had been forced into the forgotten corners of their hearts and minds, silenced and ignored. It reminded them that they were individuals in their own right. It also showed them the insidious way in which sex and gender-based violence surround them, which worked towards and on the basis of making it appear to be a given, almost as a fait accompli.

Many of the women domestic workers had been exposed to sexual harassment and violence, not only at their homes, on the streets but even in their workplaces. But due to the shame and silence that shroud this issue, conversations about sexual harassment, especially at their workplace, are difficult to have. Historically, the victim has somehow been made to feel responsible and then ashamed of experiencing sexual harassment. This is even more pronounced in the context of sexual harassment of women domestic workers at their workplace, given the privateness of their workplace, the unclear recognition of them as a labour force and their rights therein and their lack of bargaining power.

However, identifying and addressing these issues needed the women and their adolescent children to use their life experiences, in order to bring about change. Participatory learning methods are based on the learner being actively involved in the process of learning, rather than only being at the receiving end of the teaching. This methodology has been used extensively in the centres to get women domestic workers to open up about their experiences, to explore their sense of self, to identify and address the factors influencing it. These sessions, conducted with both the women domestic workers and their adolescent children, focused their attentions on how gendered their sense of self was, how accepting of violence they had all become, placing themselves last in their list of priorities.

Through these sessions, they learnt to look at themselves differently, to recognise and appreciate their strengths, to accept and be gentle with their weaknesses and fears and anxieties, to see themselves separate from the gendered identity that society has locked them in, and to make choices that prioritise them and their well-being. Participatory sessions were employed to sensitise women on issues of sexual harassment at workplace and encourage them to verbalise their experiences of the same. These sessions also brought into sharp focus the lack of information among domestic workers, of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act of 2013 that protects them from sexual harassment at workplace. The participatory methodology was extensively used to initiate and sustain conversations about sexual harassment, especially at their work places, possible because of the perception of the kendras being spaces safe to have such conversations. Participatory learning sessions to facilitate sex and gender, socialisation and patriarchy, and gender-based violence helped them understand and accept the presence of sexual harassment in the personal, professional and public spheres in their everyday lives and report them without fear or shame.

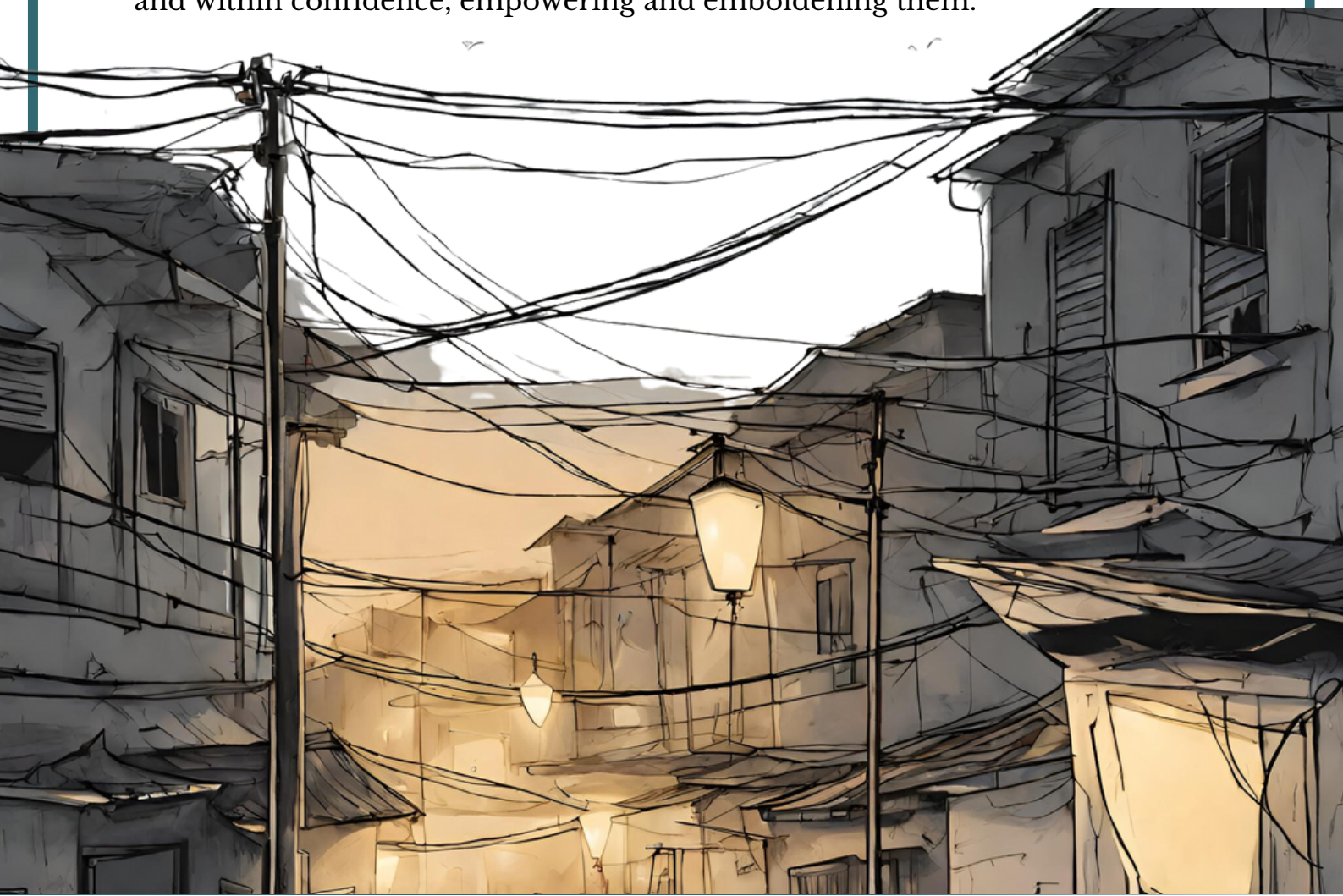
The Swabhimaan Kendra provided them safe, neutral, non-judgemental spaces for them to engage with these issues. For those who could not come to the Swabhimaan Kendra to attend the sessions, home visits were organised in Gautampuri and Gurgaon, to engage the women domestic workers in conversations in whichever space they considered safe. Since they looked upon the Swabhimaan Kendra as their safe space, the women domestic workers and their adolescent children felt encouraged to participate actively in the sessions, not just as passive listeners but as active participants, which empowered them to facilitate change.

When the centres came up, they became, first and foremost, a place that belonged solely to the women. It was not like others were forbidden from coming there. But when women collect in one place, in large numbers, they are usually a force to reckon with, one that no one wants to interrupt. And so, the Swabhimaan Kendras became their place, their space. Having the centres was like having a refuge, a place they could escape to, when even the home became a prison. This space has, by its unique presence in their lives, become their go to place, whether to recoup or restore or rejuvenate or regain. It has made them stronger and more empowered from within.

This strength and confidence have taken their time in becoming a part of the women of the community. They began slowly, tentatively, coming back again and again to draw on the strength and the sisterhood that the safe space incubated. Gradually, coming to the centre became a part of their everyday and then it became the central point around which their entire day revolved

Listening to other women speaking about their fears, their aspirations, breaking free from the unseen bondages that tied them, encouraged by learnings and experiences of their peers, facilitated by workshops and activities based on art and theatre and other experiential methodologies, empowered them to tentatively start speaking with each other, then sharing their stories with many more, and then gradually, becoming agents of change themselves, speaking up for themselves and others.

Many changes have trickled out of the centres as well; changes which have affected the outside world for the women. Be it the reassuring presence of street lights lighting up the dark streets that used to threaten the women, brought about by the efforts of the women themselves, or the change in the behaviour of men and boys who used to earlier make passing by on roads impossible; the access and hearing that law makers and law enforcers have given and have assured to the women—the activities conducted in the Swabhimaan Kendras have also slowly but surely changed the world around them and the people in those worlds. When the Martha Farrell Foundation conducted a study on non-judicial responses to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) among asylum seekers and migrant workers, they found that gaps in implementation of laws and policies which could be better addressed through having a safe space and a solidarity group, both of which enable women to empower themselves with knowledge and with self-belief. Such spaces also enable women to talk about their experiences in a safe space and within confidence, empowering and emboldening them.



Because of the centre, the women feel like they carry a whole village with themselves; even when outside the centre. They feel secure and confident that if there was a need tomorrow, they would have someone who would speak up for them, even if they themselves could not. For each woman, being in the centre, has been a journey and each journey has been unique. For some women, the space has been meant the absence of having to do chores; for some, it has been a space where they can be free with their bodies; the absence of men in this space has given them the freedom to lie or sit around as they please, not bound by the dictates of propriety by society. For yet others, it has meant discovering the desire and the strength to bring about change; for yet others, it has meant a space where they can silently absorb, imbibe and carry it within themselves, to dig deep into it, when the going gets tough. But most of all, what the centres have done, is make women know themselves and place themselves higher in their list of priorities than ever before. It is not an externally imposed strength or change of heart, but one which has risen organically, in the safe surrounding of the centre, to today fill each woman up with the confidence of being able to address many aspects of her life. Pinky is unable to attend all the activities that are conducted at the centre because of her small children. Yet, she can not only feel the difference in the world around her, she also carries a quiet reassurance of the presence of all the women around her, were she to need them. For Sarita, working with the centre has slowly but surely planted a seed of self-confidence, which has now become a full-fledged tree. Initially hesitant to talk to women, rebuffed by them and their families as she asked them to come to the centres, today, she not only has become a guide and facilitator, looked upto by all the women and their families, she can now walk into anybody's office, snub any taunt, without any hesitation or self-doubt. The women are able to also negotiate their safety better in their workplaces. The posh societies where the women domestic workers work, know that these women are no longer alone. People in these societies now avoid the gaze of the women, especially when there is any doubt in their minds about how their behaviours towards the domestic workers might be getting perceived. And this is the confidence that collectivising has given to the women domestic workers. Each woman is a Swabhimaan Kendra in herself; she can do as her heart pleases – a luxury she is not accorded often.

A unique aspect of the safe space created within these Swabhimaan Kendras was the access and space that they accorded to the adolescent children of the women domestic workers. The Swabhimaan Kendra were designed keeping in mind the requirements and needs of women domestic workers. However, this space soon came to be embraced and then owned by the children of these women domestic workers. The centres provided space that helped break the perpetuity of the vicious cycle of invisibility and lack of agency for the children too.

This interaction with adolescents, one could say, was one of the most life changing usage of the safe spaces of the Swabhimaan Kendras. Initial interactions with the adolescents found them with severe anxiety issues and a worrying level of disenchantment and loss of hope about being able to break out of the situation they found themselves in.

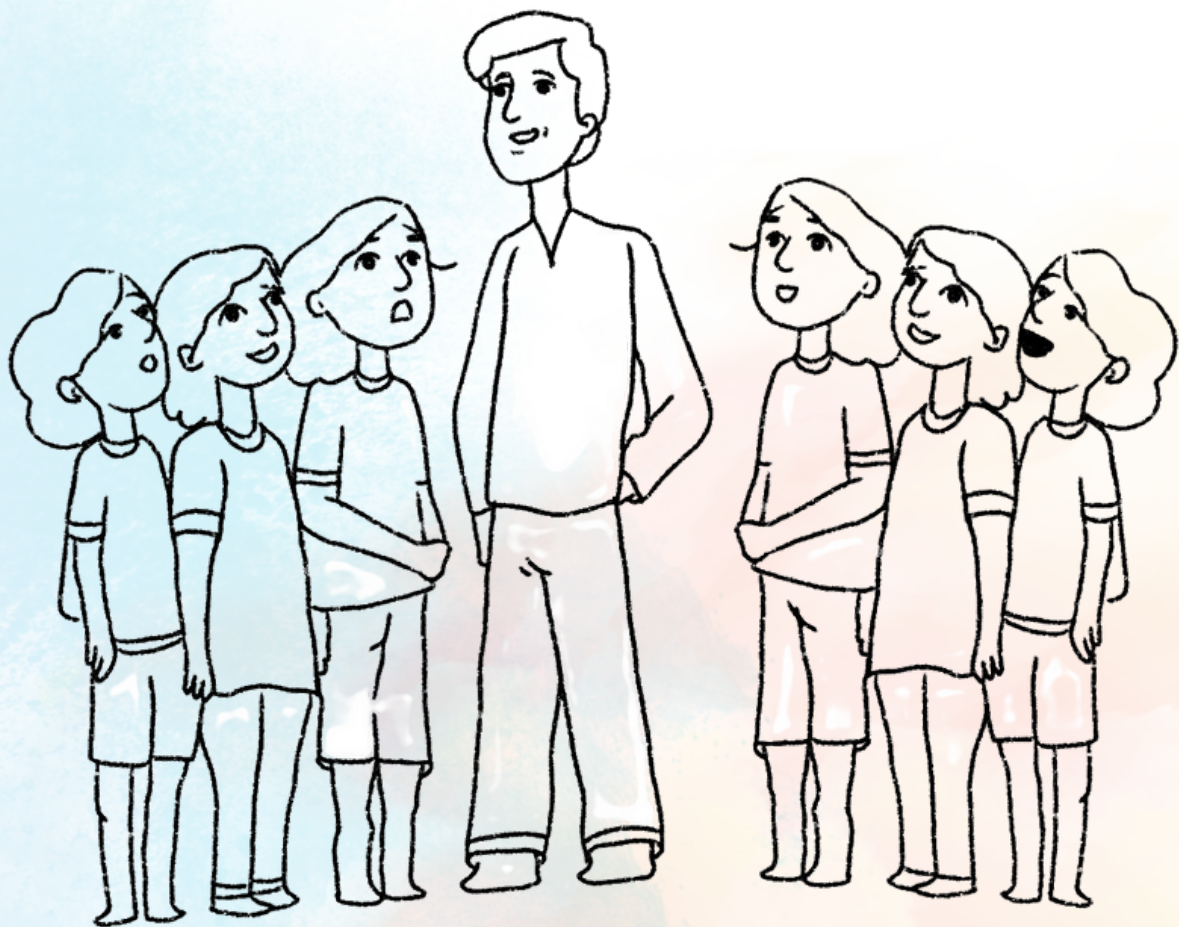
They seemed to be resigned to a continued life of gender and sexual violence, seeing that as the norm. The same lack of space and opportunity to discover themselves, the same lack of any platform to hear and address their fears and aspirations, that were a reality for the women, were realities also for their adolescent children. The safeness and assurance of the Swabhimaan Kendras enabled them to access sessions that addressed these gaps in their lives. Sessions held together for adolescent boys and girls, in the safe and neutral space of the Swabhimaan Kendras, enabled the development of mutual understanding, acceptance and respect between the young boys and girls at the threshold of their sexuality.

Arti, an articulate 14-year-old, says that these sessions helped the boys and girls understand each other better, speak more openly with each other, resulting in a definite shift in the attitude of the boys. Mutual respect, understanding led to greater acceptance of the other. Sharing the same space with each other made them realise that both boys and girls faced gender-based violence and this increased empathy in their interaction with one another.



Arti is now full of hope and confidence, looking forward to doing more workshops, becoming more informed and empowered, as she continues her studies in 13 Sanskrit and computers and looks forward to when she can also, like her elder sister, leave home to pursue computers. Education, and the access to it, has meant hope for change for Arti.

Conversations with adolescent boys, in the safe spaces of the Swabhimaan Kendras, enabled them to understand the processes of socialisations that influence the formation of the masculine identity in adolescent boys, encouraging the development and perpetuation of toxic masculinity in them. Interactions with the boys were used to challenge these norms of masculinity which have been given a position of not just acceptance, but of aspiration, in our society. These spaces allowed the adolescent boys to drop adherence to well entrenched norms and encouraged them to explore ways of establishing safe, mutually respectful partnerships with each other and with the larger society. These centres provided the adolescent boys also a safe, non-judgemental space, where they could talk about their weaknesses, their strengths, their fears, where they could explore their vulnerabilities, their identities. This created a solidarity, an acceptance among them, within the realities that they exist and helped them develop empathy towards each other. The various exercises conducted in these sessions sought to address the cracks and scars within them, so that they could look at growing not as fractured psyches, but strong, empowered individuals, who had the strength and the will to help one another achieve their potential and work to overcome their weaknesses.



A prime example of the success of these sessions is young Sakim. Confident and gentle at the same time, Sakim faced a lot of resistance initially from his parents, for his eagerness to attend the sessions in the centres. At best they thought these sessions were a waste of time and at worst, they were worried that he was learning about wrong things, things that would turn his head. Gradual interactions with the facilitators, changing environment in the basti, finally enabled him to attend sessions and come to the centre. Here, he learnt about how damaging toxic masculinity is, not just for those it bears down on, but even for those who adopt this version of masculinity. He has become a peer influencer of sorts, speaking with his friends to desist from toxic behaviour and activities, speaking even with grown-ups, to point out the folly of their ways. He is happy that everyone listens, whether they follow what he is saying or not, is another matter. But he could see that the presence of the centre and the sessions therein, had started bringing about changes, not just in those who attended, but in the thinking of those at the periphery and even in the general environment of the basti. Cat calls and lwded remarks passed at girls crossing, are a thing of the past. Adolescent boys are trying to expand the influence of the Swabhimaan Kendras by being peer influencers. Shrugging off their hopelessness and resignation towards their lives, these adolescents have been able to become advocates and agents of change in their own rights, using tools such as theatre and art, as tools of change.

When women domestic workers and adolescent children articulated their experiences and recognised that they were not alone in their experience of sexual and gender-based violence, they began to design solutions informed by their experiences. They now owned their experiences, their problems, their selves and they owned the keys to all solving all their problems.

MILESTONES IN THE JOURNEY TOWARDS ENABLEMENT

The creation of these spaces, as Swabhiman Kendras, brought the women and their aspirations together, thereby empowering and enabling them to collectively think, identify and then design activities that ensure their individual and collective empowerment. The processes used in the activities that were conducted in these kendras, were designed to encourage women and adolescents to identify, verbalise and then use their life experiences to bring about changes in their own lives. It has been a journey of self-discovery, of finding their voices, and then becoming agents of change. This journey has been marked by several key milestones.

1. Learning to identify the problems and envisioning the solutions

Through the creation of the safe spaces, the women domestic workers became aware of their denial of the realities of their lives. Participatory research and visioning exercises helped women visualise and articulate their challenges, especially those that they had faced during the pandemic, like hunger, loss of livelihood, mounting bills, and their deep desire to have a women's group, with shared experiences, which could provide them with support and solace in times of distress. These exercises also helped them vocalise their aspirations for learning newer skills and exploring other avenues of earning or supplementing their incomes. These sessions identified key areas that demanded intervention, such as addressing their lack of information on basic rights, health and social protection entitlements, their need for rebuilding self-confidence, introduce literacy, especially digital literacy and financial literacy among others.

2. Learning to understand sexual and gender-based violence and its presence in their lives

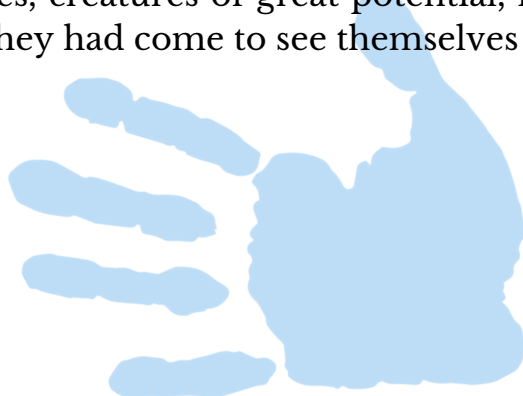
Sessions on the fundamentals of sex and gender were held for the the women domestic workers, to help develop a fundamental understanding of the causes of gender-based violence. Their attention was brought to and then focused on the insidious ways in which sex and gender-based violence exist in their lives and influence their sense of self, their view of the world, shape their relationships, and delineate their boundaries. Gender discrimination, themes of power and patriarchy, the resultant violence against women and children, helped the women look into and identify and then address their own biases, even unconscious or sub conscious ones, and belief systems, even lifelong ones, which may support or accept such descrimination and violence.

3. Changing the life view of adolescents

The Swabhiman Kendras have become conducive and safe space for adolescent girls and boys, who would accompany their mothers to the centres. Infact, some of them would access these centres even on their own, after school, to spend some quiet time doing homework and other things. While these Kendras had been designed keeping in mind the requirements of the women domestic workers, soon, the sessions also began to incorporate issues that concerned the adolescent children. These sessions used poetry, art/drawing, music to draw out the adolescents in Gautampuri and Gurgaon to explore their self-identity and the factors that influenced it and then separate their identities from those factors. Through these sessions they came to map their aspirations, gain a deeper understanding of their own identity, interests and emotions, discuss the challenges of the pandemic on their education and career goals, and deliberated strategies to overcome these challenges towards achieving their aspirations. Global Guy Talk is an example of unique ways designed to engage the adolescents in conversations on themes of ego, vulnerability, friendship and love, an MFF initiative in partnership with the Swedish Embassy in India and IM Swedish Development Partner.

4. Learning to plan for a better tomorrow

Lost in the day-to-day business of survival, most of these women domestic workers have forgotten their aspirations, their desires to learn different and new skills. These safe spaces, where women have the time and the freedom to explore their own interests, have been used to enable women to discuss those long-forgotten desires and aspirations, to learn some new skills. Sessions to map interest areas in business development, initiated discussions on possible opportunities for women based on their skill sets, knowledge and interest. They were introduced to other skills which they can employ, to further enhance their earning abilities and potential, such as photography. There were capacity building sessions on literacy and entrepreneurship. Sessions on financial literacy introduced them to the basics of budgeting, saving and planning expenditure. Women used this space to learn skills such as stitching or services at beauty parlours. These sessions enabled them to see as economic creatures, creatures of great potential, rather than the domestic workers alone, that they had come to see themselves at.



5. Self- Help Group: A way towards collectivism and sisterhood

Women domestic workers in Harijan Basti, Gurugram, took the initiative to form a self-help group to support one another financially and emotionally after attending a financial literacy and entrepreneurship workshop. They collected the names of 30 women domestic workers and decided, as a group, to collect a fixed amount of money each month, in order to give loans to the women who might feel the need for one. As the first Self Help Group set up in the basti, the women lay a lot of importance on supporting and respecting each other's choices, supporting women in talking about their problems, seeking help and providing support. 2 informal Self Help Groups also came up in the Swabhimaan Kendras at Gautampuri, which provided the women with loans and other help in the absence of awareness of government schemes and support systems for their financial and social security. These SHGs also worked out ways to access government schemes and information, so that they could facilitate the same for the women of the community.

6. Building self-belief and confidence through information and discovering Voice and Agency

These safe spaces provided the women domestic a platform to also discover their self confidence, their self belief, that they can make change happen. Domestic workers in Gurgaon, led the only and first covid relief operations for domestic workers supported by Dasra, during the second of the pandemic. The experience of being in control at the forefront of such a large-scale operation, ensured agency and self- confidence. The adolescents used this new found self confidence to lead a Participatory Safer Audit of their community spaces, analysing spaces around them, from the safety point of view. they created maps layered with photos about areas where women had ever encountered any form of sex or gender-based violence and then used these as tools to advocate for greater safety, with representatives of governance and law and order. This was a first of its kind survivor centric, trauma informed safety map of Gautampuri and Harijan Basti. As a continuation of this, 20 women domestic workers each in Gautampuri and Gurgaon were trained as Community Safety Leaders (Suraksha Mitra), trained as First Responders to instances of violence in the community, and armed with information on the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. They facilitated discussions on issues of safety and its linkages to lack of services and information, shared crucial information women's rights, gender-based violence and supported them in reaching out to the One Stop Crisis Centre - key institution responsible for the safety of the members of the community.

Empowered solutions designed by informed women domestic workers, were further enhanced through screenings of films exploring concepts of self-confidence, assertiveness and various forms of gender-based violence. It brought home to the participants the fact that gendered roles play out insidiously, and that discrimination and violence exist, even if not visible or obvious. How they exist, are subconsciously expressed and accepted.

7. Prioritising the self

Sessions at the Swabhimaan Kendras, placed women, their needs, their aspirations, their fears, at the centre of everything that was done. Efforts were made to ensure that the women domestic workers felt like that they were learning to and then doing the necessary to improve the quality of their existences. In the Swabhimaan Kendras, periodic, ongoing sessions were conducted on mental health, highlighting the link between mental health and issues of discrimination and derogatory or discriminating language. And how one needs to see the linkages between them and then break free oneself. Bank accounts were opened for a large number of women in Gautampuri and in Panipat, to ensure some protection against economic violence, which is also a reality for these women, who might sometimes be the sole or the highest earning member of the family. More than 265 (200 in Gautampuri and 65 in Gurgaon) women domestic workers were registered in the e-shram portal. Health cards for 30 women domestic workers were made in Gurgaon. In a life preoccupied with survival, celebrations often take a back seat. But celebrations are important occasions of convergence. The Swabhimaan Kendras provided the space for women to celebrate each day. Sometimes they would just get together for a chaat paapdi party. No reason except their togetherness being reason enough to celebrate.



WHAT THE JOURNEY HAS MEANT

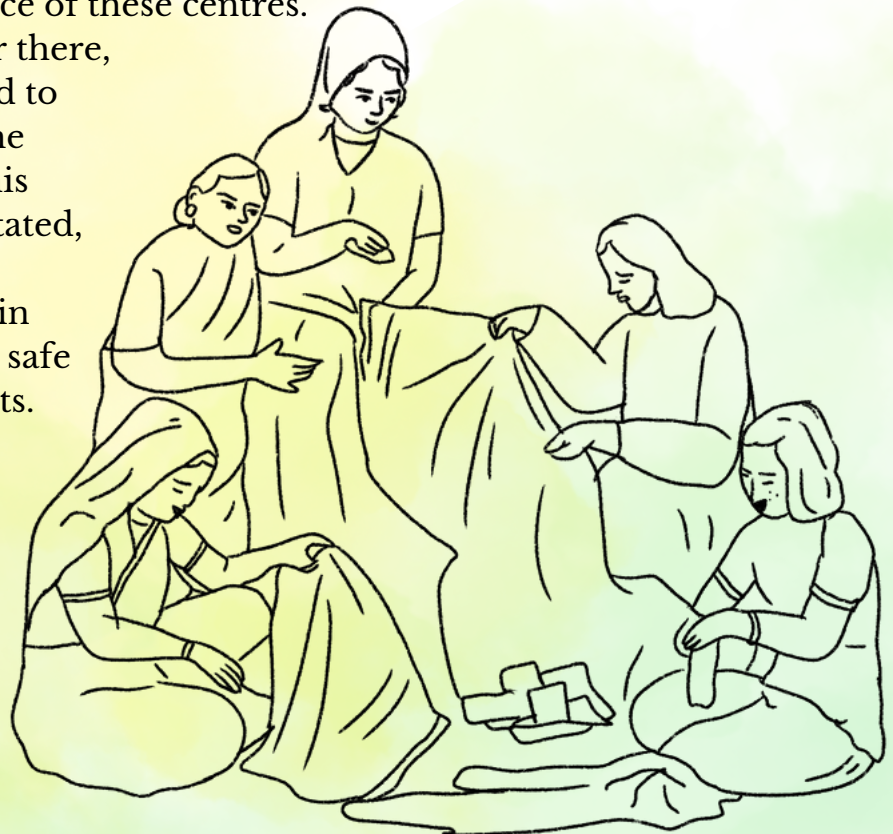
A question that begs to be answered, in any project, is that have these centres served the purpose that they were set up for? for that, we would need to refer against the list of objectives laid down above. Did it provide a space for women domestic workers to mitigate exacerbated challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic? Did it provide access to information about health-related services to minimize the challenges faced during the pandemic? Did it provide access to entitlements and services as citizens, workers and women? It did. During the second wave of the pandemic, when essentials were in short supply, it is these support centres that were identified and used as spaces to make provisions available to women and their families. the rations could be stored and disbursed from these centres, while keeping the requirements for social distancing and hygiene in mind. These centres have also served the purpose of providing safe spaces for various activities related to sexual and gender-based violence, gender discrimination to be conducted for the women and adolescents of the community. Workshops directed at financial literacy and exploration of alternate sources of income have also been conducted in these centres. However, it would be insufficient to narrow down what the centres have done, to just the above.

These kendras have become the women domestic workers' lighthouse. That structure, whose promise guides their whole day. This is the place they come, to be themselves. After finishing their work in others' homes and then in their own, they look forward to coming to this safe space, to fill themselves up with each other's energies, have conversations like only women can have with women, free of any masculine gaze or sound. This is the space where they celebrate occasions, festivals and each other's triumphs. This is the space where they regroup to apply salve to each other's wounds and fuel up their furies, to take on the world when any injustice is done to one of them. They joke, they engage, they recoup, they share and they feel empowered and strengthened.

For Sita, a domestic worker in Gurgaon, the centre is the linchpin of her day. She looks forward to the time when she would finish all her work, her own household chores, and then go to the centre to be with the other women. Before these centres came into existence, women felt like they were battling and handling their struggles all on their own. Fear, anxiety and loneliness were their constant companions. Invisible and unheard, they felt isolated. Women would not speak, would not share their experiences or their reasons for fear. They would continue to carry the trauma of their experiences within themselves. Thus, what these centres did was over and above the objectives that had been laid out for them. These centres serve as spaces for the women to collectivise, to form a togetherness that can make things happen. The force that could make sure provisions were procured and disbursed. The force that could walk into a police station and demand for unsafe streets to be made safe.

The force that could demand justice as a collective, when one of their own was physically assaulted by her employer. The swabhimaan kendra gave the women domestic workers a space to call their own, where they found each other and, in the process, they found themselves, their voices, their agency. It has also changed the world around the women. While initially men were wary of the women of the localities coming together and while in some places the centre came up in areas which were traditionally occupied by men, they have now come to respect the boundaries set in place by the presence of these centres.

Except for a taunt here or there, mostly men have adjusted to the coming together of the women and occupying this space. This has also facilitated, albeit reluctantly in most cases, male participation in making the communities safe for women and adolescents.



TOWARDS NEWER HORIZONS

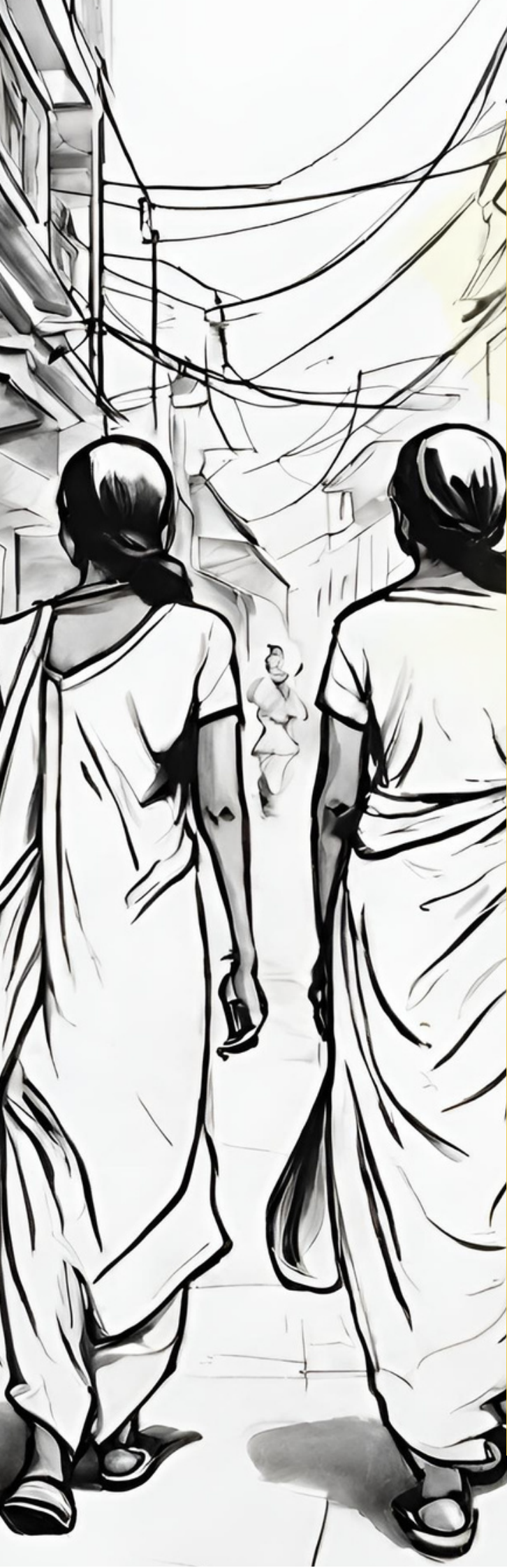
Everyone wants space. The creation of a trustful, safe, definite space goes a long way in enabling and establishing supportive and dependable relationships among women, collectivising them and making them into a force of change and leadership, not just for themselves but also for other women. The Swabhimaan Kendras, by their very existences, proved that when a safe, non-judgemental, neutral space is provided to women, they blossom, they open up, they explore, they question and then they discover. These spaces enabled the women to look into themselves, share experiences that they and society might have buried deep under shame and silence, unburden themselves of the trauma that they had been carrying for so long, and then stand straight and tall. As agents of change, as agents of empathy and support. Everyone wants change. Women domestic workers do not want their children, particularly their daughters, to work as domestic workers. They desire improved education for their children, as well as friendly neighbourhoods, appropriate sanitation, and safety. They also want to ensure that their children, specially their daughters, do not fall prey to the ideas of norm prevalent in society, which seeks to suppress the confidence of women. But they do not know to break free from the vicious cycle that they find themselves trapped in. Often times, they feel that they are alone, waging a war against the world and against destiny. However, if they find others who have similar stories to share, who have similar dreams and aspirations, it makes them believe that they are not alone. That change, is possible. And that they can make this change happen.

Everyone wants someone else. The Swabhimaan Kendras became a girl gang get together spot. They go to place at the end of a hard, busy day. They go to space when they wanted to learn something new. They go to place when they wanted to wind down, breathe out, lay back, give in, stand up, anything. They go to space when they wanted to believe again. Because in these spaces, they found sisterhood, they found an echo of their own songs, a retelling of their own tales. And this joining of forces was what brought about a wave of change. Because these spaces accorded women the space and the platform and the time to bond, to heal, to soothe.

They discovered, they had each other. Now, when the women are fairly empowered, when the world around them stands subtly changed, it is time to figure out if the Swabhimaan Kendras have outlived their existences and if they need to redefine themselves into some other spaces. Or if they can be done away with totally. One thing stands clear from all the women domestic workers, these spaces have to be sustained somehow. They have started something that needs to see itself to its conclusive end. The Swabhimaan Kendras need to redefine themselves, they need to expand themselves, to envelop within them, more women and adolescents who need to be enabled and strengthened. They need to expand themselves to provide within themselves, more responses to newer, greater needs of these women and adolescent children. With women and adolescent children viewing this space as their own, for their own development, certain other activities can also be added to the ongoing ones. There is so much more to achieve.

The Swabhimaan Kendras need to grow to allow greater access to education, specially to those who need assistance and nurturing and find it absent at home. They need to become spaces that empower girls and women, to physically defend themselves and others, by providing training and learning in martial arts. These Kendras need to put out roots in more parts of the city, so that more and more communities can come together and pull each other up.

After a long duration of working under shadows of closure and other such apprehensions, these Swabhimaan Kendras need to be made independent of any interference or hinderance by anyone. These spaces need to be neutral, safe and belong to the women, for the women and their adolescent children. These centres have provided the women domestic workers and their adolescent children with a lot of hope and strength and a promise of enabling them to change their present and their future. These centres are not just spaces that are being used to plan and implement interventions and engagements with the women and adolescent children. These centres have now become spaces of identity for the women—a space where they can look forward to being themselves. Just themselves.



देखूँ जब मैं अपना जहां
लोग ही लोग हैं यहाँ वहाँ
बांधें मुझे यह लोग सदा
कहाँ है इस जहां में मेरी जगह?
dekhooon jab mein apna jahan
log hoi log hain yahan vahana
bandhe mujhe yeh log sada
kahan hai is jahan mein meri
jagah?

इस ओर मेरी दुनिया सिमटे
उस ओर मेरा आँचल लिपटे
बस मैं ही मुझसे मिल ना पाऊँ
कहाँ से अपना स्वाभिमान जगाऊँ?
Is or meri dinuya simte
Us or mera aanchal lipte
Bas main hi mujhse mil na
paaoon
Kahan se apna swabhimaan
jagaaon?

इक जगह बना दो मेरा भी
जहां मिला दो मुझसे ही
छोड़ दूँ मेरे डर यह सारे
फिर सवाँरूँ सपने प्यारे
ik jagah bana do mera bhi
jahan mila do mujhse hi
chhod doon mere dar yeh saare
phir savaaroon sapne pyare

हैं कोई ऐसी जगह
जहां मैं हो सकूँ बस अपनी तरफ़
ढूँढे मेरा मन सदा
मिले मेरा स्वाभिमान जहां
hai koi aisi jagah
jahan mein ho sagoon bas apni
tarah
dhoondhe mera man sada
mile mera swabhimaan jahan?



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