

STRENGTHENING THE AGENCY OF WOMEN AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS TO SHIFT NORMS AND ADDRESS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

January-March 2026

An initiative supported by SRF Limited



Martha Farrell Foundation

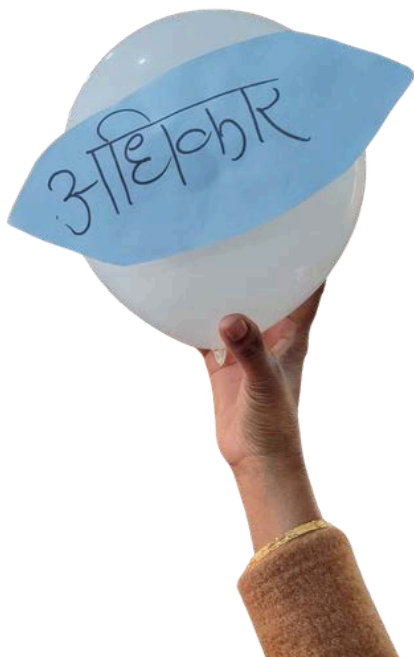
Written and designed by : Stuti
Edited by : Samiksha Jha

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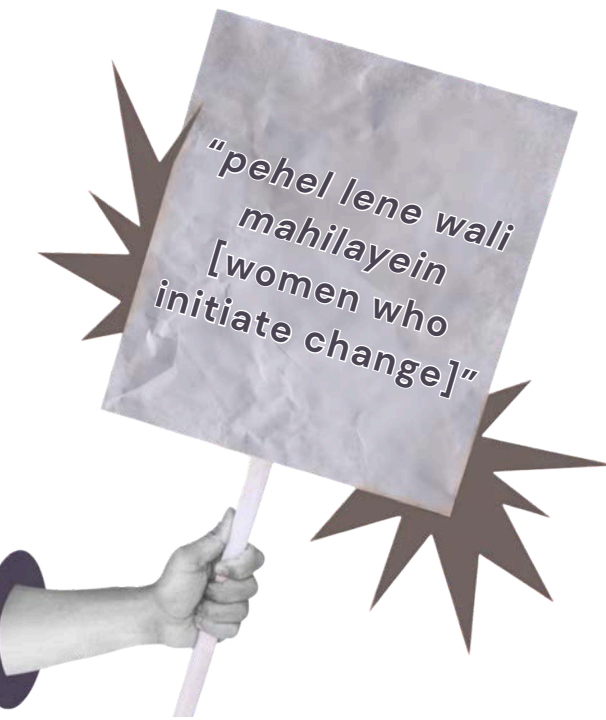
ABOUT THE PROJECT



'Strengthening the Agency of Women and Adolescent Girls to Shift Norms and Address Gender-Based Violence' is an initiative started by the Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF) through the support of SRF Limited. Through this initiative, MFF aimed to strengthen and build the capacity of its women community leaders across Delhi and Haryana on building their voice and agency on issues of safety, and dignity at their workplaces, homes, and within their communities. This ensured an organic process of cultivating grassroots feminist leadership. It also supported collective action within the communities to engage with local authorities and institutions to find out sustainable and locally-rooted ways to bring a change regarding shifting patriarchal norms to address Gender-Based Violence [GBV] within their communities.

A core principle of our work at MFF is strengthening the '*Pehekar* Model'. This model is a community-led leadership model that organically emerged through sustained engagement with women and adolescent girls across urban and peri-urban communities. *Pehekar*s are women and adolescent girls from the community who take the initiative to challenge violence, support survivors, and shift patriarchal norms within their social settings. Rather than planting external volunteers or short-term project facilitators, *Pehekar*s are embedded within their own communities as community leaders.

Based on their lived experiences, they gain legitimacy and build a strong sense of trust within their respective communities, as they themselves live there. This model also ensures a long-term presence to drive a change that is impactful and caters to their communities' needs.



HOW DO PEHELKARS INITIATE CHANGE AND PROVIDE SUPPORT?

Acting as 'first responders and community anchors', *Pehelkars* identify and respond to cases of violence whether physical, sexual, emotional, economic or even digital. They are trained to use a survivor-centric approach, by keeping the confidentiality of the survivor in utmost consideration. They support survivors in accessing one-stop centres, police, legal aid services, health services, and even government social security schemes. Beyond responders of crisis within their communities, *Pehelkars* play a critical role in prevention of incidents of violence, harassment, and challenge authorities and dominant patriarchal norms prevalent within their communities to initiate meaningful change.

They are also equipped with participatory training methodologies and dialogues on gender, power, patriarchy, and women-centred laws such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, the Protection of Children Against Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 so that they gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of these subjects. These sessions are designed not as one-way information sharing but as collective spaces for reflection, questioning norms, and building confidence to act.

FIRST RESPONDER IN THE COMMUNITY



IDENTIFIES AND REPORTS CASES



The *Pehelkar* model also intentionally integrates economic agency and collective resilience. Many *Pehelkars* support the formation of women’s collectives that focus on pooling funds for savings, digital literacy, access to entitlements, and livelihood initiatives. In Panipat, for instance, *Pehelkars* have supported women and adolescent girls working in agriculture and other informal livelihoods to form collectives that function both as support systems and as small-scale businesses. This enables women to generate income, build savings, and make informed decisions within their personal and community-life on matters of education, health, and self-care.

Over the past decade, MFF’s work has resulted in a strong cadre of *Pehelkars* across multiple districts of Delhi and in Panipat, Haryana. Experienced *Pehelkars* have gone on to mentor newer leaders, build survivor support networks, and engage institutions such as schools, panchayats, police, and district administrations. Today, *Pehelkars* are recognised in their communities as **“pehel lene wali mahilaayein” - women who initiate change** and are increasingly seen as credible actors in addressing violence, safety, and rights at the grassroots.

The *Pehelkars* model represents MFF’s long-term investment in grassroots feminist leadership, demonstrating that when girls and women are supported to reclaim agency, build collective power, and engage institutions, sustainable and locally rooted change becomes possible.



COMMUNITY ANCHOR

INITIATES FORMING WOMEN’S COLLECTIVE OR SMALL-SCALE BUSINESSES TO EMPOWER ECONOMICALLY AND SOCIALLY

**COMMUNITIES
REACHED**



15 communities of Delhi and Haryana



**PEHELKARS
EMERGED**

100



**Community Leaders
(Pehelkars)**

informed and sensitised



1,788 Women



171 Adolescent Girls



1,959 Women and adolescent girls sensitised

SOME OF OUR PEHELKARS



Shashikala



Shobha



Daraksha



Khushboo



Anu



Guddi



Selvi



Shama



Veronica



Pehelkars **Hamari Pehel [Our Initiatives]**



**Capacity Building of
*Pehelkars***



**Community Mobilisation and
Collective Action-Led by
*Pehelkars***



***Pehelkaron ki Pehel*
[Initiatives by *Pehelkars*]**



**Digital and Financial Literacy
within communities**



**Consultations with
Government Authorities**



**Use of Theatre for
Awareness**



**Visibility and
Documentation**

Capacity Building of Pehekars



1

Building understanding of GBV and nurturing skills for facilitation for mobilising community

In early and mid-January, the Martha Farrell Foundation facilitated two rounds of capacity-building trainings for *Pehekars* to deepen their understanding of gender, power, patriarchy, and gender-based violence related issues and also to strengthen their facilitation and leadership skills.

These trainings attended by 24 adolescents and 26 women leaders from Delhi and Haryana were designed in response to their expressed needs within their respective communities. To equip them with the skills, knowledge, and information needed to confidently facilitate meetings, conduct home visits, and lead trainings within their communities.

Both trainings focused on shifting social norms and addressing gender-based violence by also empowering them as leaders in participatory training methods and effective ways of mobilising their communities. Participants were also oriented on how to plan and lead community-driven interventions. In addition, the session addressed critical issues such as contracts, workplace safety, rights of domestic workers, and child protection, including key provisions under the POCSO Act.

2

Training of *Pehekars* through sports and art-based methodologies

On **16 March, 2026**, MFF conducted a third round of capacity building session 'Training of *Pehekars*'. With their day-to-day interactions in the community on the issues of GBV, to ensure their mental well-being, the session was organised. Attended by 22 women and 10 adolescent leaders at MFF's office, the session aimed at creating a safe space for trainers to ensure that they relax, connect with their emotions, and express themselves openly.

Utilising art -based methods, the exercise was facilitated with the support of an external expert, founder of the Movement Project, Shubham. This approach also introduced them to an experiential methodology that can be effectively adapted in community settings to help the community members' to openly share their experiences, build a sense of solidarity and trust.

Not everyone can articulate their experiences well verbally, hence, the next segment of the ToT session, facilitated by TeamUp for Transformation team, one of MFF's partner organisation, utilised sports-based activities, a participatory training methodology to raise awareness on issues on as discrimination, violence, gender, and socialisation processes with communities.

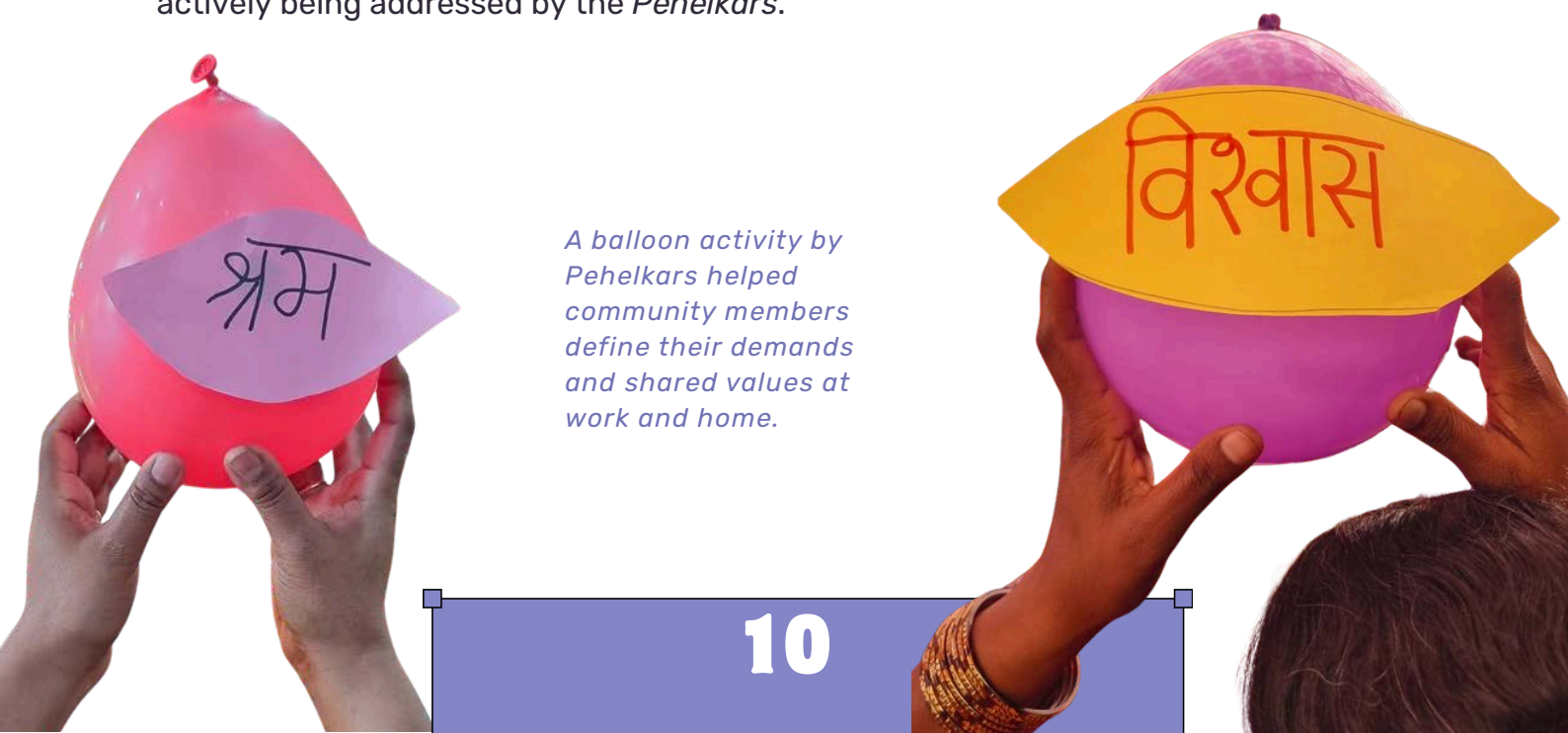


In the months of February and March, 23 of our *Pehelkars* initiated conversations within their 10 communities across Delhi and Haryana. On the occasion of International Women's Day, these conversations conducted based on the theme, "Give to Gain," created reflective and participatory spaces for *Pehelkars* to explore how acts of giving such as time, care, skills, and support, often gendered impact individual's growth and collective strength.

Sessions on gender and violence facilitated by *Pehelkars* across Delhi and Haryana

Through participatory and self-reflective exercises, *Pehelkars* encouraged their communities to recognise and articulate their own strengths, often leading to deeper conversations around self-worth, identity, and the emotional significance of acknowledging oneself. These spaces also fostered peer appreciation and dialogue on women's unpaid, underrecognised, and unappreciated labour especially within their household spaces through a short film 'Juice' shown.

Women *Pehelkars* associated with MFF, who are almost all in domestic work, recognised the double burden of both unpaid and paid carework that they practice within their own homes and at employers' homes. Based on their lived experiences, they identified and recognised how at many places of their work they are often underpaid than their male counterparts. Overall, the sessions made community members reflect and gain a deeper understanding of their participation, rights, and societal expectations imposed on them. Sessions like these, have opened room for further dialogues, leading to cases emerging within the communities which are actively being addressed by the *Pehelkars*.



A balloon activity by Pehelkars helped community members define their demands and shared values at work and home.

Community Mobilisation and Collective Action-Led by Pehelkars



Pehelkars mobilise members from the community through door-to-door mobilisation. By reaching out to the members within their community, through regular conversations on their daily lives. They also identify, mediate, and report cases within their communities. Some of the cases that usually emerge within the communities include issues of:

- **Non-payment or irregular payment of salaries**
- **Lack of leaves**
- **Wrongful confinement of full-time domestic workers**
- **Cases of child sexual abuse**
- **Abandonment of wives by husbands**

Apart from these cases as listed, the *Pehelkars* also initiate collective action within their communities to find sustainable solutions with support from local authorities such as:

- Recording videos and photos of garbage dumps within their community and mobilising women to collectively reach out to the authorities to initiate action
- Providing support and courage to survivors to go file FIRs with the police

Pehelkaron Ki Pehel [Initiatives taken by Pehelkars]



The *Pehelkars* have been working throughout this period in the communities undertaking several critical interventions for spreading awareness on GBV issues and related laws, supporting redressal of cases of GBV in the communities.

Conversations: At MFF we strongly believe that information is the first step towards the process of empowerment. However it's important that it is understood by the communities that receive it. Keeping this in mind the *Pehelkars* have been holding conversations with the women in their communities. Centered around the International Women's Day theme of "Give to Gain", these conversations focussed on the importance of care work and the need for its recognition in enabling people to go to work and eventually contributing to the overall economy. These conversations were facilitated through community sessions using participatory methodologies and also through home visits by the *Pehelkars*. These conversations also emphasised the importance of strengthening women's collectives to support fellow women workers in countering such narratives and collectively responding to instances where dignity is compromised at work.

Trainings: While information is the first step, awareness or the realisation of the discrimination and its impact on their lives, is the second step towards the process of empowerment. Building upon the conversations with women domestic workers on workplace dignity, *Pehekars* facilitated training sessions on GBV, legal and fundamental rights, International Labour Organisation's convention 189, sexual harassment at workplace, redressal mechanisms and welfare schemes for women and adolescents in their communities. The objective of these sessions was to support women in understanding violence in its totality, going beyond the physical nature of it and also reflecting critically to understand their own lives from the perspective of facing violence.

Case handling: Over a period of time when women become aware about violence happening in their lives, they begin to mobilise to act against it. In some of the communities, women began to report cases of violence. The *Pehekars*, loaded with knowledge of redressal systems and mechanisms, supported them in filing complaints with the police, negotiating with the employers and in a couple of cases connected them with advocates and counsellors. The support provided by *Pehekars* has strengthened the fact that women's collective are critical institutions for addressing cases of GBV in communities. Currently, while in a couple of cases the *Pehekars* have been able to secure justice for the survivors, some are still with the police. The *Pehekars* hope to resolve them soon.

TESTIMONIALS FROM PEHELKARS

66 From domestic violence to abuse, I lacked any information that was important and relevant for me. Now that I know the law, I do not just stand up for myself, but for all the other women connected with me.

Daraksha, Pehelkar from Haji Colony

“Women in my community are now standing up and speaking. Seeing this gives me a lot of joy.”

Shobha
Tigdi community

“All 400 women, I have collectived in my community, can be leaders.”

Guddi
Jasola community

“When everyone comes together to find solutions, many problems get resolved.”

Anu
Devli community

Khushboo
Shram Vihar community

“I can boldly question and challenge any authority with confidence.”

Pehelkars' Reflections



- The training helped participants gain more **confidence** in facilitating sessions independently.
- Many mentioned that the activities conducted made them realise that simply giving instructions is not enough; listening and **participation** are equally important.
- Pehelkars also learnt new participatory methodologies to engage with the communities.
- Adolescent Pehelkars expressed that they now feel **better equipped to speak** with teachers, community members, and local authorities.
- On the other hand Women Pehelkars, who also work as domestic workers shared that they **felt empowered** to begin conversations with their employers about contracts and also negotiate with the employers on wages, leaves and working fair and dignified conditions.

66

When something happens within the community and we go to visit that particular area, two to three of us women go together. All the work cannot be done by one woman [Pehelkar]. Even during community engagement we have seen that we need to build a collective.

99

Digital and Financial Literacy within Communities



Some of the *Pehelkars* associated with us in Raksera village of Panipat district in Haryana have established their own small-scale businesses, contributing to women's economic empowerment and strengthening their agency. One such initiative, 'Swabhiman', had its initial seeds planted through the resource centre supported by MFF.

Building on these livelihoods and emerging needs, *Pehelkars* expressed interest in deepening their understanding of saving, investing, and using digital platforms effectively. In response, with the support of an external resource person and long-standing partner of MFF, six sessions were conducted in February and March. These sessions focused on financial planning, budgeting, the benefits of forming Self Help Groups (SHGs), and entrepreneurship within the community. A total of 100 women and adolescent girls from the village participated.

Through these sessions, women began to strengthen their financial decision-making capacities and gained greater control over resources, which is central to building agency. Enhanced access to financial and digital knowledge enabled them to participate more actively in household and community-level decisions, gradually challenging restrictive gender norms. This also contributed to creating conditions where women could better recognise and respond to instances of GBV, linking economic empowerment with their ability to assert rights and seek support.

Through the digital literacy initiative, women and adolescent girls also learnt to use mobile-based digital services, many for the first time. They gained skills in making and receiving calls, reading and sending messages, capturing photos and videos, and navigating social media platforms further strengthening their access to information, networks, and opportunities.



Pehelkars discussing and sharing about digital media platforms, mobile services, and financial literacy at a community centre in Raksera village, in Haryana's Panipat district.



Reflections from the community



“Now, I will no longer have to depend on my children; I can operate the mobile phone myself.”

“Today, we felt that financial literacy boosts women’s self-confidence.”

“I was always afraid that I might accidentally damage the phone, but today I realised that it can be used quite easily.”

“This session helped us realise that, through Self-Help Groups, we can become economically strong.”

Consultation with Government Authorities



Swabhiman Samaan (Award)

On the occasion of International Women's Day, on **7th of March**, the Martha Farrell Foundation, in collaboration with the Gram Panchayat of Raksera village in Panipat district, organised "**Swabhiman Samaan**", a ceremony to recognise grassroots leaders advancing gender equality and women's empowerment within their communities. As part of efforts to expand the Pehelkar model of community leadership in Haryana, the initiative identified and honoured thirteen local changemakers working on key issues such as improving access to education, reducing school drop-out rates, and addressing gender-based discrimination.

With the Panchayat's support, the event saw participation from over 800 villagers, creating a space of collective motivation and inspiration. It also brought together key stakeholders, including representatives from the Haryana State Commission for Women, the district's Child Marriage Prohibition Office, and the District Legal Services Authority. Their presence provided grassroots leaders with an opportunity to build connections and access institutional support, while strengthening the Foundation's efforts to drive sustained, community-led change in the region. The dignitaries felicitated local changemakers and reinforced the importance of grassroots leadership in advancing gender justice, helping lay a strong foundation for continued community action in Haryana.



During the ceremony, adolescent leaders shared findings and recommendations suggested from a safety audit they conducted within their communities. The open stage for conveying their demands helped them reach out to the local panchayat and other relevant stakeholders for initiating necessary steps within their communities to ensure safety for everyone.

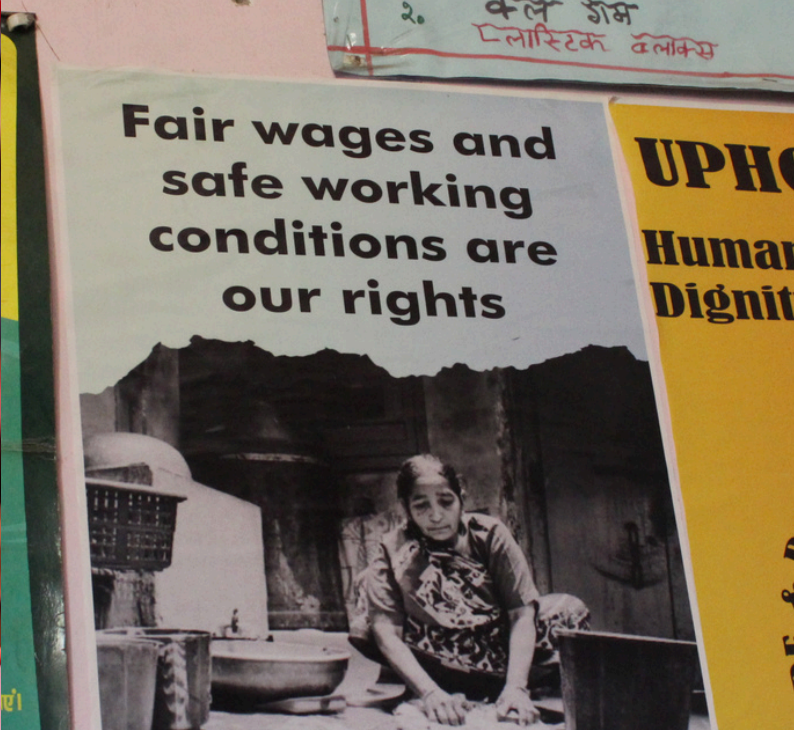
Use of Theatre for Awareness



During a community session, adolescent leaders (*Pehekars*) expressed their interest in advocating against patriarchal norms through theatre. As a medium, theatre helps communicate messages that might otherwise face resistance within communities, making art-based methodologies like street plays a powerful tool for spreading awareness on GBV and fostering meaningful community engagement. These simple yet impactful approaches serve as a strong vehicle for advocating social change.

On 18th of March, adolescent leaders organised a Nukkad Natak across two areas of Taimoor Nagar, one of the communities in South-East Delhi where MFF engages. The performance highlighted the barriers that often hinder adolescents, especially girls, from progressing, including pressures from family, relatives, neighbours, and wider patriarchal norms conditioned within the society.

Through this street play, nine of our young leaders raised awareness on the importance of girls' education and child rights, while encouraging communities to take small but meaningful actions towards ending GBV and discrimination.

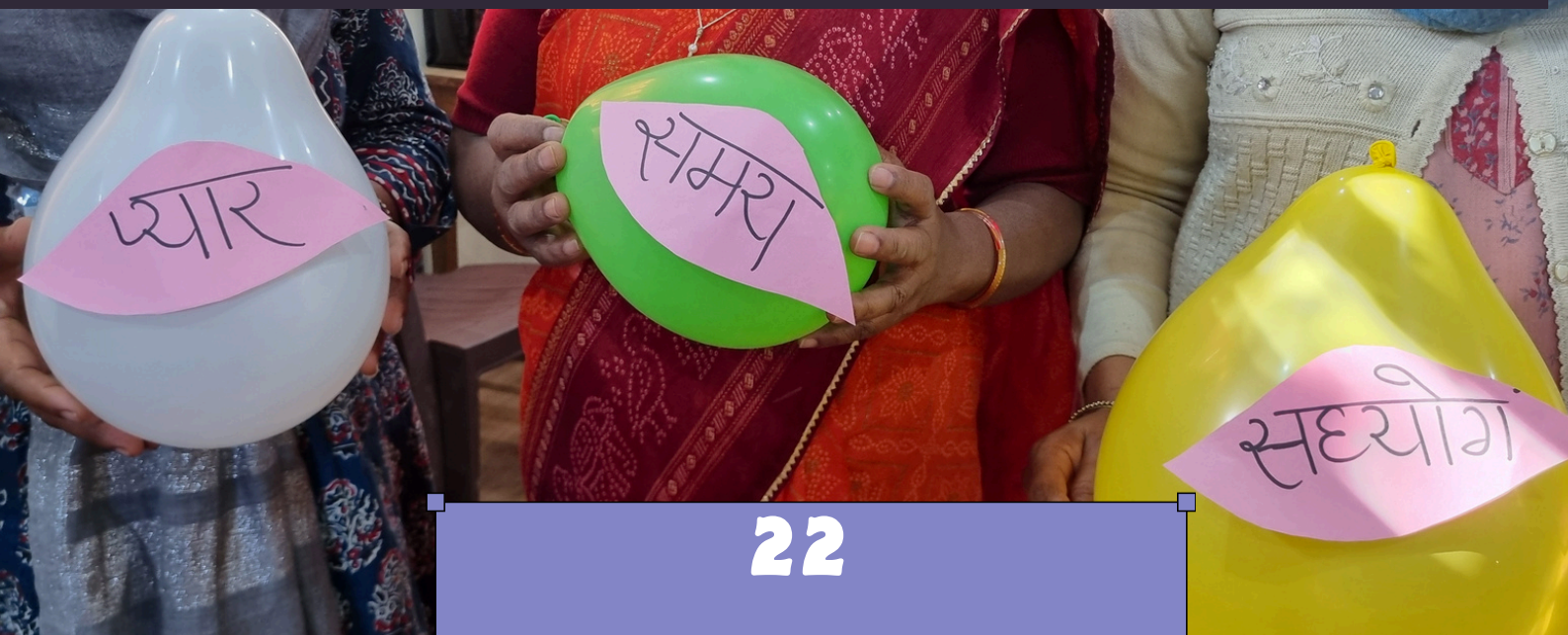


Visibility and Documentation

The *Pehelkar* Leadership Model ensures that first responders from the community build long-term trust, legitimacy, and solidarity, making it a sustainable leadership model emerging from the communities we engage with. To ensure these leaders feel recognised, valued, motivated, and supported, we believe this model can also be utilised by others to strengthen grassroots feminist leaders to address GBV.

To expand the *Pehelkar* model and gain wider public recognition for these efforts, MFF curated participatory learning materials based on the *Pehelkars'* own inputs, in the form of videos, posters, and handouts. Some of these will be used by them to facilitate sessions within their communities on gender, power, patriarchy, and GBV. Others document their own stories through illustrations and narratives in a booklet titled 'जुनून: Stories of resilience, camaraderie, and community leadership of women domestic workers'.

These materials will support them not only in facilitating sessions and raising awareness, but also in strengthening solidarity, trust, and legitimacy within their neighbourhoods, as families take pride in seeing their own community members' stories.



Way Forward



Women domestic worker leaders and adolescent leaders who have been trained on gender, GBV, participatory methodologies, and the use of art-based and sport-based tools will continue to facilitate community conversations, meetings, and dialogues on violence prevention and reporting mechanisms with relevant stakeholders.



Going forward, *Pehekars* will receive additional training on documentation processes, recognising their role as primary responders who support survivors in reporting incidents of violence within the community. The training will focus on case documentation, follow-up skills, and developing capacities to engage with survivors using a trauma-informed approach.



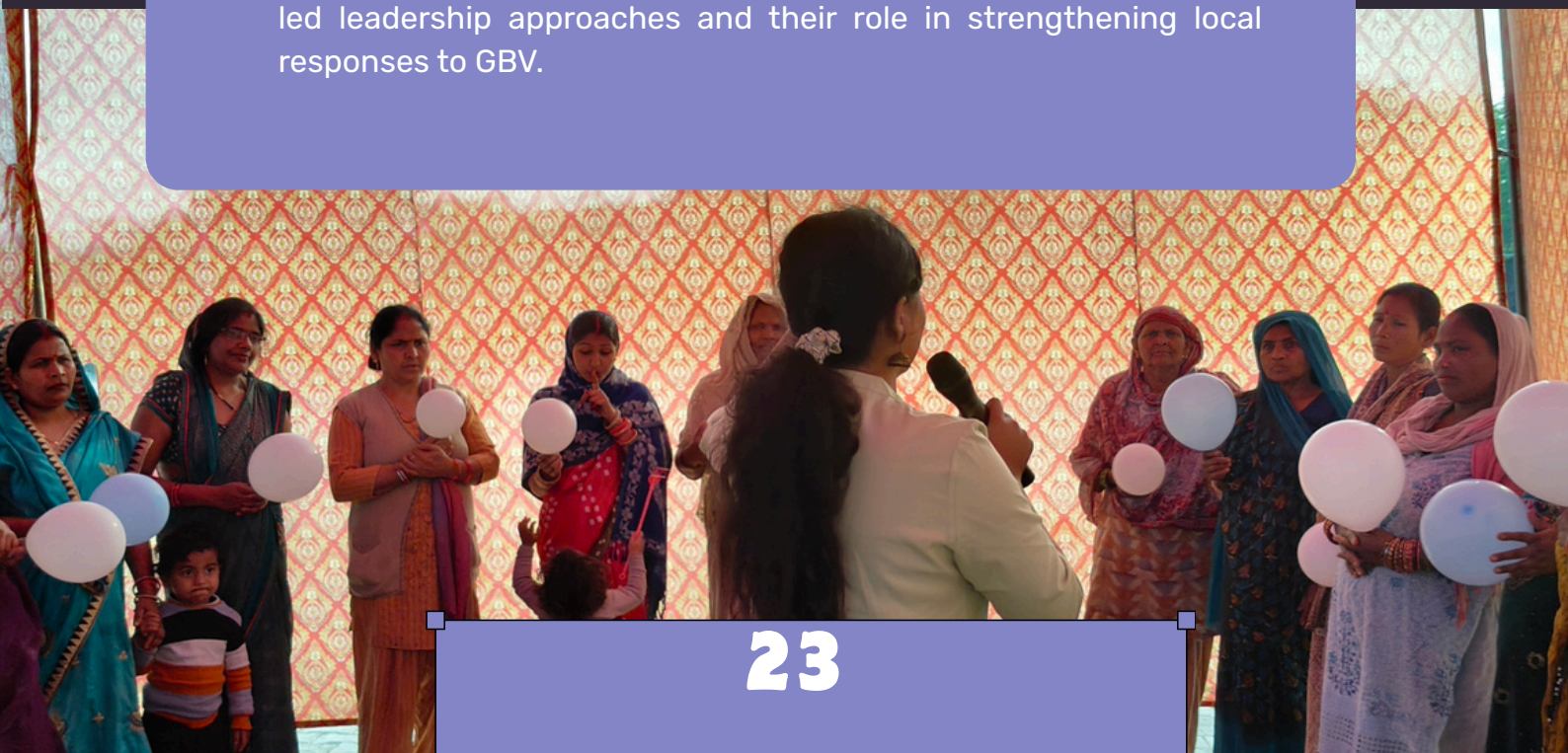
Pehekars will form groups of women and adolescent girls and facilitate discussions on power, patriarchy, and discrimination through participatory methods, including video and film screenings followed by collective reflection and dialogue.



They will also engage young boys through dedicated community groups, creating spaces to discuss gender norms, consent, boundaries, and positive roles men and boys can play in preventing and responding to GBV.



The *Pehekar* model of feminist community leadership will be shared with other civil society organisations and sector professionals to enable cross-learning and replication. *Pehekars* will actively demonstrate and present the impact of community-led leadership approaches and their role in strengthening local responses to GBV.





MARTHA FARRELL FOUNDATION

42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110062

Phone: +91-79826 40139

Email: info@marthafarrellfoundation.org

www.marthafarrellfoundation.org