

Mobile Stories

December 1, 2020

The Dutch Deputy Chief of Mission chats with Domestic Workers in South-Delhi and Haryana

Context

On March 25, 2020, in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government called for a nationwide lockdown, stopping all but essential activities. In the course of two months, several functions that we were used to doing on-the-ground, went online, including schools and universities. Work from homes became the new norm and culture, and connectivity with family, communication with friends and loved ones became restricted to telephonic and digital means.

During this time, the role and importance of a mobile phone became prominent, in not just accessing emergency services, keeping in touch with one another, but also took precedence in public discourse in relation to education, with particular emphasis on girls' education.



Image Caption: Women domestic workers discuss lockdown challenges and the need for a mobile phone with every woman and school-going or working child in the community with MFF



Those without smartphones - a large majority among rural and urban poor households - were forced to realise how critical the device is, in our everyday lives, and how divisive the lack of smartphone access among populations, can be.

As more people started pushing for access to smartphones, another realisation emerged - the role of a smartphone in one's life even out of context of the pandemic. A device made available to domestic workers and their daughters for the purposes of communication with their employers, teachers and schools, became far more important than those few anticipated functions.

Background

In the aftermath of the lockdown in India, the Martha Farrell Foundation facilitated the distribution of smartphones to domestic worker communities and school-going girls in Delhi-NCR region.

During our conversations with the domestic workers, we learned about the various challenges they faced because of the lack of smartphones and what having the smartphone really meant to them.

When we shared what we learned with the Netherlands Embassy, a long-standing partner with whom we've completed a number of successful projects on women's empowerment and upliftment of domestic workers' lives and rights. Intrigued by some of the findings, the Dutch Deputy Chief of Mission Mrs. Anneke Adema, requested a direct conversation with the women and girls who had received mobile phones via MFF's distribution program.

On December 1, Mrs. Adema, Ms. Ilona Domanska, Second Secretary, and Ms. Karanpreet Kaur, Senior Policy Officer with the Netherlands Embassy, met with the following women:

- Sarita, Neetu, Ambia and Bharti, domestic workers living in Sector 53 in Gurgaon
- Jyoti and Laxmi, two school-going girls living in Sector 53 in Gurgaon
- Charu, Soni, Gulista, Amisha and Aasma, school- and college-going girls from Sector 4 in Dwarka, New Delhi

The discussion also coincided with the 16 Days of Activism, a global movement led by individuals and organisations to take a firm stand against and eliminate instances of sexual and gender-based violence, and accordingly, questions were contextualised to the movement. The discussion revolved around some key thematics and questions posed by the Dutch Deputy Chief of Mission to the women and girls.

The Discussion

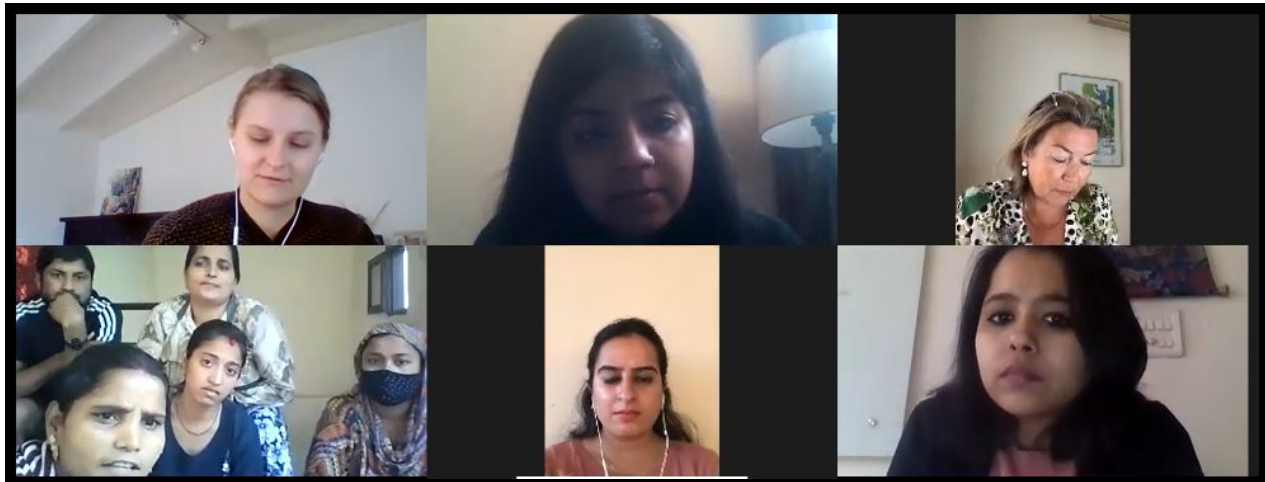


Image Caption: Dutch Deputy Chief of Mission speaks with women domestic workers and children from informal communities in Gurgaon, Haryana and Dwarka, Delhi

Following are the key conversation points to emerge from the discussion:

- **What would your message be for the women who are part of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence global campaign?**
 - *“We are happy to hear that women around the world are raising their voices for this cause. It is only with collective action that we can work towards gender equality together,”* Sarita.
 - *“I am so happy that I am able to be a part of this campaign and have a voice in an international movement like this one,”* Bharti.
- **How important is it to have a voice in a campaign such as this one? How is having a smartphone helping you in adding your voice to the movement?**
 - *“Mobile phones are extremely important for women like us. Sometimes we get stuck on the way to and back from work, sometimes, we get late at work. It becomes easier for us to call our families and let them know that we’re safe, or in case we need help let them know,”* Sarita.
 - *“Mobile phones are also helping us get together and talk about things in the middle of a pandemic. For us to be able to gather, using the mobile phones have been very helpful. It’s only because we have our smartphones that we were able to talk to each other and come together for this digital meeting, and place our voices in this critical movement,”* Neetu.
 - *“Mobile phones are helping us take online classes and attend school during this lockdown time. I haven’t fallen behind in my studies thanks to this,”* Amisha.

- *“I work in a parlour along with my studies. I find it very easy now that we all have a personal smartphone with us, to communicate with my family and friends in case I’m stuck or running late,” Gulista. “We used to have only one phone in the house - and we’re 3 sisters and one brother - which used to create a lot of issues. Now that I have my own phone, I find it easier to communicate and feel safer commuting to and back from work.”*
- **Have you ever been in a situation where you’ve been extremely threatened, and found that having a phone protected you?**
- *“I had just finished work one day, and as I was on my way back, a boy began chasing me and asking me to speak with him. I tried to scold him away, but when he refused to go, I called a friend using my phone - and seeing that, he got scared and backed off,” Gulista.*
- *“Everyday, the path I take to go to work and come back home, it’s very dark and dangerous, and now, with my personal phone, I just feel safer traveling to and back from work,” Gulista.*
- **How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your life?**
- *“COVID-19 has brought our life to a standstill, and there are so many challenges we’re dealing with now. There is too much uncertainty, and I’m so worried now about my future and the future of my children,” Sarita.*
- *“We have lost our jobs, but the landlords keep asking for rent, for electricity money. The houses we work with haven’t even paid us during the lockdown and even our incomes have taken a fall,” Neetu.*
- *“I am not able to rejoin work because of the discrimination - guards aren’t allowing us to enter the buildings within which we work,” Neetu.*
- **What is it that we can do to support you?**
- *“The situation is such that we’re all being taken advantage of. Work that we used to charge Rs. 6000 for in the past, we’re forced to take up at Rs. 2000 - because we don’t have enough work to do, and we’re in a very desperate situation,” Neetu.*
- *“Nobody in my house works, except me and my father. This is my first time working and I’m doing it side-by-side with my studies. Some people are good and helpful, but some people also make me feel unsafe and uncomfortable. If I’m going out to work, I should feel safe, and I should be able to work without thinking ten times about whether it is safe for me to, or not,” Gulista*

- *“The pandemic, from what I have seen, has made the women who I’m with right now, extremely unhappy. There is additional stress, because of all the uncertainty and the discrimination that domestic workers are facing at their workplaces. Women deserve, more than anything else to be happier, and to live life like they did before, happily, without all this mental stress,” Sanjeev (Sarita’s husband)*



Image Caption: A Tweet from the Dutch Deputy Chief of Mission on her reflection and learning from the discussion with women and children