

“Hum dusro ki pasand ka itna karte hai, apna hi bhul gaye (we care so much about others’ needs that we’ve forgotten ourselves)”

Women domestic workers in Faridabad demand safety in their world of work

Date: 17th September 2021

Place: Faridabad

Number of participants: 25

Field Facilitator: Anima

Resource Persons: MFF Program Staff

Introduction

Conversations around safety in the world of work for women domestic workers are not easy to hold. Cultural stigma, silence and shame around the issue of sexual harassment, and their precarious working conditions and earning inspire fear and hesitation to open up. The Martha Farrell Foundation, with support from the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women and Girls, are leading a program to empower women domestic workers and strengthen institutions to respond to instances of sexual harassment in their world of work with prompt efficiency and sensitivity.

As a first step towards meeting this objective in the district of Faridabad, Haryana, a Listening Circle was held with 25 women in the district. The session aimed at building trust among the women and enabling them to open up about their challenges in the workplace. The district field facilitator, Ms. Anima, had already commenced the baseline survey to gauge women’s awareness of the issue of workplace sexual harassment and the Indian law to prevent, prohibit and redress such instances, when the session was held.



Women Domestic Workers introducing themselves

Highlights from the Conversation

The session began with a game-based activity that invited participants to speak about their work and hobbies. Right at the beginning, it was evident that as women, the domestic workers were unable to voice any challenges they faced, and could only focus on their love for cooking and cleaning at the home and the workplace. An alternative of discomfort with such instances was not something they had ever imagined. The conversation around these challenges only opened up when one participant spoke about her frustration at her children, who would eat the food she cooked for them, but leave the chore of cleaning the dishes to her.

Box 1: Priya (name changed), a domestic worker from Faridabad speaks about her life and work

I used to work at a kothi (bungalow), but I lost my job during the lockdown. I don't think there's anything wrong with doing domestic work. Any work that helps you eat and sleep at night is fine. Since I haven't gotten any work after the lockdown, I cook for my family.

The women then participated in an art-based activity in three groups to gauge their feeling of safety and lack of safety in their world of work. Each group's answers and inputs were then compared, which revealed commonalities. Areas in the *basti* (community) were mapped to be unsafe for women and children in particular.

The activity paved the way for women to share their experiences of sexual harassment, particularly in their world of work. Even women who were hesitant to speak up, contributed to the discussion by narrating such incidents they had observed or heard of from other domestic workers.



Box 2: Neelam (name changed), a domestic worker from Faridabad, shares her experience of working in a hostile environment

When I used to mop the floor of the house, my employer used to sit in his underwear. He never used to lock the washroom door when he went inside. I told his wife that I do not like this behavior. She refused to acknowledge that her husband was sexually harassing me. I told them to pay me for the days I worked that month and I left that job. They even threatened me that they won't let me enter society ever again.

The participants were then told about the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the workplace Act, 2013. Almost every woman in the group was unaware that there is a law that prohibits sexual harassment and can potentially protect them in their world of work.



Key Learnings

- Experiences of sexual harassment at workplace faced by women domestic workers have not come to the fore even though there's a Law that protects them. At the same time, the experiences are many and varied, leaving millions of women extremely vulnerable in the workplace
- While women domestic workers may not be aware of the terminology and language around sexual harassment, they are keenly aware of facing violations in the workplace. The silence around the issue has little to do with the lack of recognition of it, and more to do with the lack of institutional mechanisms available to counter it
- There is no awareness among the women domestic workers of Faridabad of an eight year old Law that protects their rights

Next Steps

- The baseline survey will inform the next steps for advocacy with local government and stakeholders to strengthen the implementation of the Law and hold institutions accountable to the unique needs of women domestic workers
- The women domestic workers will continue to meet and support one another building on this conversation and growing their community of solidarity and support