

“Mai peeche wala raasta lene ka toh soch bhi nhi sakti” (I can’t imagine taking the way behind my house to go to my workplace because it’s so unsafe)

Women domestic workers of Jal Vihar, Delhi take part in a Participatory Safety Audit to mark safe and unsafe spaces in their settlement

Date: 20th January 2022

Place: Jal Vihar, South Delhi

Number of participants: 20 women domestic workers

Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff

Field Facilitators: Helen and Sarvari Raju

Introduction

#मैत्री is a project to build sensitive and accountable institutional mechanisms to prevent, prohibit and redress sexual harassment in the world of work of women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR, started by women domestic workers and the Martha Farrell Foundation, with support from the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls. In line with the goals of the project, Martha Farrell Foundation’s program staff, in partnership with women domestic workers and field facilitators, organised a Participatory Safety Audit¹ (PSA) with and for women domestic workers in Jal Vihar, South Delhi.

To meet the objectives of the PSA, participants gathered at the center of the Jal Vihar settlement, in South Delhi district of Delhi, which also serves as a public meeting area for residents of the settlement. This area is surrounded by houses of women domestic workers and a public toilet.



Participants creating a Participatory Safety Map of Jal Vihar, South Delhi

¹ A Participatory Safety Audit (PSA) is a technique whereby participants are invited to visualise their communities in terms of the levels of safety in their surroundings. A ‘Transect Walk’ is usually conducted prior to a PSA, wherein participants walk through their communities and observe areas that they believe to be ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’— a facilitator also provides other guiding questions during this activity. Participants are then invited to create a safety map that details their observations during the entire process.

The session began with a few women domestic workers and the Martha Farrell Foundation at this central location, and gradually garnered attention from other women workers, men from the settlement and children, who then proceeded to join the gathering.

In line with participatory training methodologies, 20 women domestic workers who led the session were initially oriented about the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace; they were also sensitised about their rights under the Prevention, Prohibition of Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act (PoSH Act, 2013).

The session was envisioned as an exercise to start a conversation on safety of women in the community and the challenges they face in their world of work. Sexual and gender-based violence in the world of work of domestic workers is rarely spoken about, and the participatory tool proved to be an effective method to break the silence on the issue and engage in honest dialogue with one another, a first for many women domestic workers who participated in the session.

Participatory Safety Maps created by participants, marking areas in their settlement and their level of safety, were a key outcome of the PSA, and serve as an important participatory tool for advocating for the rights of women domestic workers to live and work in safe spaces that are free of gender-based violence with relevant stakeholders.

Highlights from the Participatory Safety Audit

The session began with inputs from field facilitators and MFF Program Staff on the issue of sexual harassment in the world of work of domestic workers. Following this, the question of ‘how safe do you feel in your community?’ was posed to the participants, the answers to which ranged from feeling unsafe in their households and outside, in the community and on their way to work. The inputs thus received, were used to encourage women domestic workers to draw a map of the settlement.

Box 1: ‘How safe do you feel?’— Sita (name changed), a domestic worker from Jal Vihar, shares her experience of living in the settlement

I have been a domestic worker for many years and I was born in this settlement. The condition was really bad a few years ago, things are better now that we have a public toilet. We have made a separate bath in our households now. Earlier, women had to defecate and shower in the open and many of them got sexually harassed.

While a group of participants started drawing a map of the settlement, another group with the project’s Field Facilitators went on a Transect Walk in the settlement. Various safety issues became evident through the conversation that the group held during the Transect Walk — both in terms of the surroundings, as well as human behaviour.

For instance, participants pointed out that the settlement is surrounded by a railway track, which is usually occupied by men who play cards all day long, marking a territory that women are unable to enter, as they feel unwelcome and unsafe. A participant added that men get drunk in street corners in the settlement and misbehave with women, putting their safety at great risk — the same was evidenced by a huge pile of empty alcohol bottles that participants crossed during the Transect Walk. Participants also shared that the roads, as well as the railway tracks behind the settlement, have no street lights, making these areas inaccessible to women after dark. For women domestic workers, this also means that they cannot take evening jobs, costing them the ability to earn more money.



On their return from the Transect Walk, the participants were able to discuss and share insights on whether the areas in the settlement, marked on the Participatory Safety Map, were 'safe' or 'unsafe'. The Participatory Safety Map prepared by women domestic workers and residents of the settlement in Jal Vihar, therefore, served as a trauma-informed document, mapping the true extent of the challenge of safety and sexual harassment in the settlement, shared by residents themselves.

The map-making activity drew out further nuances to the issue of safety, through the discussion it drew on how women feel when they are in unsafe locations and how they feel when they are in safe locations.

Box 2: Reeta (name changed), a domestic worker from Jal Vihar shares her experience of living in an unsafe area of the settlement

I don't feel safe in my own house because I live alone with my children. My house is on the first floor of a quarter. It is apart from other houses of the Basti and I feel really scared when it gets dark.



Participants create a Participatory Safety Map of their settlement in Jal Vihar, South Delhi

The Participatory Safety Audit brought to light the fact that many of the areas marked unsafe by women domestic workers were the same routes that they followed to travel to their workplaces, and are a part of their world of work. Lack of safety in these spaces also results in their inability to work in a hostile environment, with no guarantee of their personal safety and the constant threat of sexual harassment.

The discussion also revealed that this fear and uncertainty that women feel while traveling to work do not end once they reach the houses they work in. A participant shared, *“Some households we work in are safe, where we have been working for years. But I feel scared in the new house I’ve found work in, because I don’t know how my employer will behave with me.”*

The PSA served a crucial tool to bring out such challenges, which otherwise would have continued to be ignored or brushed under the carpet. Going forward, the participants jointly decided to continue the mapping exercise, and keep adding layers of insight to their Participatory Safety Maps, using which they will plan advocacy strategies to ensure their safety and rights.

Key Learnings

- The participatory research tool of Participatory Safety Audits proved effective in starting relevant conversations around the issue of sexual harassment and safety in the world of work of domestic workers in Jal Vihar, an otherwise silenced subject. It promoted for the first time, questioning of the traditional notions of ‘masculine’ public and professional spaces, where women often feel unsafe and unwelcome, among the participants
- Lack of safe spaces for collectivising women to hold conversations around issues of sexual harassment, and other other forms of sexual and gender based violence act as barriers to women empowerment. At the same time, women who collectively claim these areas feel empowered
- There is a distinct lack of awareness regarding laws that guarantee the safety of women, whether in their world of work or residential spaces. Women domestic workers are also unaware of the redressal mechanisms for the same. The lack of awareness is largely because there is orientation process on the law for informal women workers, including domestic workers, on the issue of sexual harassment

at workplace. Further, employers too, are unaware of their responsibilities under the Act, and do not orient them on the issue or their rights

Next Steps

- Women domestic workers will build on the baseline data collection with more information specific to the impact of COVID-19 and the enhanced vulnerability of domestic workers. The survey data will be collected, shared and validated with a larger group of women domestic workers of Jal Vihar, through more participatory conversations, discussions and art-based activities
- The women domestic workers of Jal Vihar will add layers of insight using the participatory safety map and bring out more nuanced reasons for their feelings of safety or lack thereof
- This exercise will help the Field Facilitator and women domestic workers to conduct focus group discussion on the issue of sexual harassment and the women's experiences of the same in their world of work, orient them on the Law and begin strategising advocacy initiatives
- The women domestic workers of Jal Vihar will continue to support each other and build solidarity around the issue in their community
- Participatory training sessions and trust-building sessions with and for women domestic workers will be conducted in Jal Vihar by field facilitators and Program staff to orient them to the SHW Act, 2013, and redressal mechanisms for their complaints