

“Mahilao ki haalat waise ki waise hi hai, bass pallu neeche se thoda upar ho gaya hai” (The state of women has been the same in our country over the years, just the veil has moved from neck to head)

Women domestic workers of Mukherjee Nagar, Delhi take part in a Circle Process on gender-based violence

Date: 8th March 2022

Place: Mukherjee Nagar, North Delhi

Number of participants: 15 women domestic workers

Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff

Field Facilitators: Bibiyana Lakra

Introduction

#मैभी 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. Under the program, Martha Farrell Foundation's program staff, in partnership with women domestic workers and field facilitators, organised a Circle Process with and for women domestic workers in Mukherjee Nagar, North Delhi.

The Circle Process was organised to mark International Women's Day, which was observed across different communities of women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR under the name and spirit of 'Jashn-e-Awaaz' or 'celebration of voice'.

Sexual and gender-based violence are issues that women domestic workers have been experiencing but have not been able to speak about, due to the many layers of social, cultural and economic marginalisation they face. For them to have organised the Circle Process and broken their silence on the issue was a true representation of how women domestic workers are learning the use of Voice under this program. This is a crucial step towards achieving the program goal of strengthening the SHW Act, 2013 and its implementation to create a safer world of work for women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR.

The Circle Process took place at the home of the program Field Facilitator, Bibiyana Lakra. The women sat in a circle, surrounding the centerpiece of Roses and a Candle Lamp.



Women domestic workers participating in a Circle Process

The women domestic workers who participated in the session have been part of focussed group discussions, informal interviews and participatory trainings on the issue of sexual harassment at workplace. The data collected from the same showed that women domestic workers face gender based violence in all spheres, including their homes. Thus, the session was envisioned to bring out experiences and understandings of gender-based violence. The circle was designed in a way that kept in mind the sensitivity of the issue and provided the participants with a safe space.

Process and Highlights

The session began with women domestic workers writing their own values on a plate that they want the group to follow during the process. This included unity, trust, friendship, among others. The talking piece for the circle was a sanitary napkin which prompted a discussion about the stereotypes surrounding the use of sanitary napkins. While some women took time to stop feeling uncomfortable and shameful holding the napkin, others were motivated to use it. They questioned why women have been conditioned to feel ashamed about the natural process of menstruation.

The Circle Process began with a question asked by the Facilitator: Are women safe in India? Most of the women in the group said that this statement is incorrect and they do not agree with it. Others said that they have been able to see some form of change over the years.

Box 1: A participant shared -

One day I was walking to the market and a man started following me. He was commenting continuously which made me really angry. I stopped him and took off my slipper and beat him up. I was not scared of the consequences and wanted to teach him a lesson.

Participants were then asked if they have faced any forms of gender-based violence. Many women said that have faced sexual harassment on their way to work but they have no option but to ignore these incidents. Participants were also asked if they face violence inside their homes. Many women chose to remain quiet.

Box 2: A participant shared -

I have experienced gender-based violence all my life. All of us have faced incidents of harassment on the road and in our houses. All husbands, including mine, do not treat women as equal beings.

The Circle closed with a short session on the rights of women domestic workers to safety in the home and workplace, and mechanisms for prevention, prohibition and redressal of sexual violence under the 2005 Act to protect women from domestic violence and the 2013 Act that protects women from workplace sexual harassment.

After the Circle closed, women were asked to bring one belonging that means a lot to them and paste it on an identity installation featuring a woman. Women brought *bindis*, *bangles*, *aalta* (red henna) etc., from their homes, which they associated with their identities as women and workers.



Reflections

- The Circle Process is an impactful participatory tool in creating a safe and empowering space for women to speak about extremely silenced and difficult topics such as sexual and gender-based violence. For the first time, women were able to break the silence on such issues and question traditional and patriarchal values that had forced them into this culture of silence around such experiences
- An enabling empowerment for holding such conversations can only be created with every participant's consent to respect what others are saying. Despite the fact that this was emphasised by the facilitator in the beginning of the session, some participants remained silent and fearful of backlash. What makes a space inclusive and enabling, however, is giving them the space to listen without participating.