

“Shauchalya na hone ke kaaran jab hum pahadi pe jate hai, toh ladke log pedh pe baithke ghurte rehte hai” (As we do not have toilet facilities, we relieve ourselves in an area behind the community, and males climb the trees to look at us)

Female domestic workers of Noor Nagar, Delhi undertake a Participatory Safety Audit to highlight the lack of safety in their world of work

Date: 15th February 2022

Place: Noor Nagar, South Delhi

Number of participants: 20 female domestic workers

Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff

Field Facilitators: Helen Raj

Introduction

#मेंभी 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. Implemented by female domestic workers, and supported by Martha Farrell Foundation and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and Girls, the project aims to create safe, sexual-harassment free world of work of women domestic workers. In line with the goals of the project, women domestic workers in Noor Nagar in partnership with the Martha Farrell Foundation’s program staff undertook a Participatory Safety Audit¹ (PSA) to highlight challenges to their safety in their world of work.



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 world of work of domestic workers, under the extended definition of a ‘workplace’ under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, Redressal) Act, 2013, extends beyond the traditional understanding - it is not limited to the households in which domestic workers work. The paths that women domestic workers travel in order to reach the households that employ them traverse the length and breadth of their community dwelling spaces. Further, within their community, too, they live with their colleagues (drivers, security guards, hospitality workers who work in the same complexes as domestic workers), expanding the scope and reach of the Act to include these spaces as well. The personal and professional spheres for women domestic workers are intertwined.

The Noor Nagar settlement, located in the South Delhi district of New Delhi is an underdeveloped urban slum that is surrounded by a forested area. Makeshift houses, and open drains inhabit the community. The community has 3 hidden entrances opposite to a residential society near Jamia Millia Islamia University. Currently, around 500 families are residing in the community. Most females in the families are engaged in domestic work in households nearby. The locality does not have any specific meeting area for women domestic workers, as a result of which the session was held in an empty space at the center of the settlement.

In line with participatory training methodologies, 20 women domestic workers were initially oriented about what constitutes sexual harassment at the workplace, legal provisions under the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act (2013), as well as the redressal mechanisms for the same, under the project.

Following this, the PSA was undertaken, the objective of which was 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 a sensitive issue that is often considered taboo. Silence prevails around this issue due to the stigma attached, and the participatory tool proved to be an effective method to engage women domestic workers in a conversation around the issue, and empower them with voice and agency to demand change.

Highlights from the Participatory Safety Audit

The participatory research tool proved highly effective in sparking conversations on the issue of safety in the world of work of women domestic workers. During the discussions, participants broke their silence on the issue - many for the first time in their lives- and shared that they felt unsafe in various places such as within their own homes, as well as outside— in the community, and on their way to work.

Tracing the pathways to the households they worked in from their homes, the domestic workers were able to draw a map of their community. For the first time, they were able to visualise the physical space (their settlement) they occupy as a whole, and locate themselves in it, using the map.

While drawing the map of the community, women domestic workers began a conversation, and raised their concerns about the increasingly exorbitant rent to be paid for their *jhuggis* (makeshift homes). A few participants also shared that they have bought their small homes by spending all of their earnings. It was also discovered that a fire had started in the community in 2021, leading to widespread damage as the concerned authorities did not provide immediate help to the families living there. Participants came to terms with their economic situation and its linkages with their safety status.



After the map was created, participants began opening discussions around how safe they felt in different areas within the community. Participants shared that women and girls feel most unsafe when they defecate in the open, because of the absence of any community toilets that can be used. While discussing the routes they take to their workplaces, women domestic workers marked the entrances of the community as ‘unsafe’— evidenced by the fact that several participants shared that they had been harassed by drunk men standing near the entrance. Women domestic workers of the community work at Gaffar Manzil, Noor Nagar, Mujib Bhag, Jibri Farm and Okhla Vihar.

Box 2: Salma (name changed), a domestic worker from Noor Nagar shares her experience of feeling unsafe

I don't feel safe when I go to the jungle area everyday. We have made small spaces covered with sheets for taking a bath, but still have to go in the open to defecate. All the women in the community are scared for themselves as well as their daughters. They are scared of men and boys lurking around and sexually harassing them.

Another cause for concern for women domestic workers was that due to lack of proper street lighting, the community is highly unsafe after sundown— many of the resident domestic workers leave for work in the evening and come back at night. In addition to feeling unsafe along the routes to work taken by women domestic workers, the participants also said that sometimes they feel scared at their place of work as well.

Box 1: 'How safe do you feel at your place of work?'- Mona (name changed) shared from her experience

As domestic workers, we all have faced some form of harassment at our workplace but most of us feel hesitant and shameful to talk about it. I have heard many incidents of sexual harassment at workplace with women domestic workers. There are even stories of young girls being sexually harassed by old men at their workplaces.

The PSA served as a crucial tool to bring out such challenges, which otherwise would have continued to be ignored. In terms of possible solutions to the issue of safety in the community, due to the constant fear of being sexually harassed, participants stressed upon the need for CCTV cameras to be installed in certain areas.

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 Noor Nagar, 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
- Women domestic workers of Noor Nagar were vocal about the challenges they face in and outside their communities. However, these gender biases are perpetuated in their own behaviour towards their daughters, and daughters-in-law
- Most women of Noor Nagar are domestic workers, and are also the sole breadwinners of the family. The gender roles are defined to suit male members of the community, wherein women have to earn a living, and are also burdened with the responsibility of taking care of their children, and in some cases, their husbands as well
- Even though many of the women who participated in the audit and others in the community take on roles of leadership, particularly in the context of religion (for instance, the women took the decision to set up a Madrasa in the community, to enable young boys to learn the Quran); the baton of leadership is not passed on to their daughters and daughters-in-law, who are still not allowed to study in the Madrasa, or otherwise. Instead, they are relegated to household work.
- Being from a minority religious community, members of the settlement have deep suspicions and exhibit mistrust towards government systems, due to negative experiences in the past. Apart from water supply and community toilet issues, women shared that the land that the settlement is built upon comes under the jurisdiction of the Uttar Pradesh government, which makes it difficult for them to access any authorities or its services
- 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 Noor Nagar, through more participatory conversations, discussions and art-based activities

- The women domestic workers of Noor Nagar 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 Noor Nagar 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 Noor Nagar by field facilitators and Program staff to orient them to the SHW Act, 2013, and redressal mechanisms for their complaints