

“Aap is kanun me jis office ki baat kar rahe hai wahi pahuchna hai samay pe. Aapko bhi pata samay se late hone pe mera kya hoga (I need to reach the Local Committee you’re referring to on time. If I’m late because of work, everyone knows nothing will happen)”

Women domestic workers in Punjabi Bagh participate in a participatory training session to understand their rights against sexual harassment in their world of work

Date: 8th April, 2022

Place: Punjabi Bagh, West Delhi

Number of participants: 40 women domestic workers

Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff

Under #मैत्री 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, women domestic workers in Punjabi Bagh, a community in West-Delhi district participated in a Participatory Training session to strengthen their understanding on concepts, definitions and laws to prevent sexual harassment at workplace and redressal mechanisms.

Most participants in the session were living in a camp called Deen Dayal Upadhyay Camp in Punjabi Bagh, and were migrant women workers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan, who had been engaged in domestic worker for more than a decade.

The session began with an overview of the Law against sexual harassment at workplace— one of the only laws in the country that specifically includes domestic workers in its purview. The resource persons shared with participants the story of Bhanwari Devi, a social worker who had been gang-raped in her workplace, and whose fight for justice eventually resulted in the institution of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

Participants were then divided into groups and asked to draw their workplace and mark whether they considered them safe or unsafe. Women domestic workers drew their workplaces for the first time, and reflected on their engagement in these places as professional engagements. The discussion that ensued also prompted women to reflect on the concept of safety, and reevaluate the behaviours and actions of perpetrators that they had been normalising in their lives.

To encourage such reflection, women domestic workers were given anonymous examples of sexual harassment at workplace faced by other women domestic workers and were asked if they have seen or heard about such incidents happening around them. This conversation helped participants to acknowledge the existence of sexual harassment in their workplaces.

Highlights from the Conversation

Women domestic workers did not consider the homes they worked with as workplaces. The conversations that ensued. The story of Bhanwari Devi prompted them to reflect on the fact that their relationships with employers were professional in nature. Participants shared

with one another that caste identities were linked with their experiences of gender-based violence.

Box 1: A participant shared -

“Jaati ke aadhaar pe humse kaam ki jagah pe bura bartav karte hai.. Darr lagta hai ki kahin humare saath bhi kuch galat na ho jaye” (Our employers treat us differently on the basis of our caste. Sometimes, we feel scared that because of our caste, we might even face sexual harassment)



While older women were hesitant to talk about their experiences of harassment in the workplace, younger women were able to speak up about the issue of safety in their world of work.

Box 2: A participant asked -

“Agar koi niyokta gaali de toh bhi unsafe hai na? Kyunki aisa bohot gharelu kaamgaaro ke saath hota hai par hum samajh nhi paate yeh sahi hai ya galat. Kya hum iske khilaaf arwaaz utha sakte hai? (If our employers verbally abuse us, does it mean our workplaces are unsafe? A number of domestic workers face this but we are unable to identify whether this is right or wrong. Can we raise our voices against it?)”



Women domestic workers draw their workplaces

Because the participants are used to seeing extreme forms of violence around them and belong to extremely patriarchal families, it was observed that they felt that violence against women and girls are an outcome of their own behaviours and actions. Consequently, the responsibility for safety is also perceived to be a woman's or girl's. Experiences participants have had also inform such thinking.

Box 2: A participant shared -

“Hum budhe ho gye par mai apni beti ko samjhati hun school mei aur raaste mei dhyaan rakhne ko. Hume darr laga rehta hai kyunki humare saath bhi raaste mei chd chad hoti hai. (I've become old, but I teach my daughter to be careful while travelling. I feel scared, because I have faced instances of sexual harassment while going to my workplace)”

The session succeeded in prompting women domestic workers to begin questioning these notions. However, participants agreed that they have a long way to go to fully understand their rights to safe workplaces.

Reflections

Lack of awareness of rights and laws, traditional mindsets and patriarchal norms have led women domestic workers to take complete ownership of their own safety, instead of holding institutions accountable for their safety and wellbeing. Participatory art-based methodologies are an effective learning tool, as women expressed that the creation of a safe and enabling place to hold such conversations were extremely helpful in helping them to articulate their challenges and thoughts without fear. Contextual and colloquial language and simplification of legal jargon and processes were seen as very helpful for participants to begin understanding the processes under the law.