

## ***“Mai police ke paas gyi, par kuch nahi hua (I went to the police to complain, but no action was taken)”***

**Women domestic workers in Devli, Delhi open up about their experiences of sexual harassment at the workplace**

**Date: 17th August 2021**

**Place: Devli, South Delhi**

**Number of participants: 70 women domestic workers**

**Field Facilitators: Helen and Raju**

### **Introduction**

Conversations about sexual harassment at workplace are difficult to hold among women in India because of the stigma, shame and cultural silence that shrouds the issue. Among women domestic workers, who live in precarious economic and social conditions, with little bargaining power with their employers, the issue is even more silenced.

In line with #मैभी, a project to build resilient systems of change to prevent, prohibit and redress sexual harassment in the world of work of women domestic workers in Delhi-NCR, the Foundation in partnership with women domestic workers and field facilitators, organised a listening circle session for 70 women domestic workers in Devli, South Delhi. The listening circle was envisioned as an exercise to build solidarity among women domestic workers and help them break their silence on the issue of sexual harassment at workplace and collect critical (and currently non-existent) quantitative and qualitative information on the issue - in the form of personal narratives, responses to a survey form and map the change through the action research project.

In line with participatory methodologies, women domestic workers were simultaneously sensitised and made aware of the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace being illegal, and their rights under the Act. The information empowered the women and empowered them with Voice to speak up about past experiences of sexual harassment in their world of work.

The exercise also supported the field facilitator in the district in getting more responses on the mobile-based survey form. Earlier, the field facilitator had tried to record responses, but had been met with reluctance from participants. Through the Listening Circle, it also became evident that women domestic workers were afraid to voice their lived experiences, in case the information they provided was relayed to their employers or families. The kind of backlash and harassment they would face in case of such a thing happening was an important insight for the Action Research project to take forward more open, safe and enabling conversations with women domestic workers on this particular issue.

Cramped living conditions mandated to break the group of women into two groups in separate locations to facilitate a more open and COVID-safe discussion. The meeting began with the women sharing their stories and challenges they face in their world of work and through this process over a span of two hours, highlighted several nuances to the way women domestic workers experience sexual harassment in the workplace, while simultaneously empowering them with a sense of solidarity with one another.



### Highlights from the Listening Circle

The session began with input from the field facilitators and MFF Program Staff on the issue of sexual harassment at workplace being illegal, and its forms and types. Elucidating the forms and types of sexual harassment became a crucial conversation starter, and pushed participants to begin sharing their experiences. Women who were initially reluctant to share their experiences watched others share, and felt empowered to speak up as well. The discussion established a circle of trust and a safe space, a first for many of the women who attended. Even those who did not share their personal experiences were emboldened to express their fear of backlash - losing their jobs and being cast out of their communities and families.

***Box 1: Lata (name changed), a domestic worker from Devli, shares her experience of sexual harassment***

*I have been a domestic worker for 15 years. A few years ago, my friend told me that she was being sexually harassed by her employer. She tried to ignore this for some time but after a few months the frequency of incidents at her workplace kept increasing. She asked me if I could accompany her to the police station to file a complaint. I went to the police to help her out but the police refused to register a complaint against the harasser.*

A key point of discussion was that most of the women domestic workers are not aware of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act of 2013 that protects them from sexual harassment at workplace. Women spoke about their feelings of mistrust and fear of authorities, which further seal their silence on experiences of sexual harassment at workplace. At the most, they would take matters into their own hands and complain to their employers or leave their place of work. Filing complaints with the Local Committee was a possibility that most women were completely unaware of.



*Baseline form filling in Devli, Delhi*

The impact of the conversation was such that women domestic workers also began to volunteer to participate in the mobile-based survey. The field facilitator, taking from the ongoing learning during the session, was able to simultaneously collect responses, as well as answer questions that women domestic workers had, thereby facilitating a two-way learning process.

### **Key Learnings**

- The lack of data around sexual harassment in the world of work of women domestic workers does not indicate the absence of such experiences. The fact is that sharing such experiences takes a lot of courage. Creating a safe and conducive environment for dialogue has proved an effective model for discussions around the issue
- While women domestic workers may not be aware of the terminology and language around sexual harassment, they are keenly aware of sexual harassment being an act of violence
- Participatory approaches and participatory action research methodology has proven an extremely effective tool in increasing awareness and understanding for all stakeholders involved. The methodology is conducive for hand-in-hand strategising and re-strategising the project plan

- There are foreseeable challenges in conducting a traditional baseline survey among women domestic workers around the issue because of fear of loss of livelihood and backlashes from the community and the family. A safe environment that is free of bias and judgement is thus essential to hold such conversations.
- Women domestic workers are unaware about the law that guarantees them safety and dignity at their workplaces. The lack of awareness is largely because there is no authoritative body that oversees orientation of women domestic workers. Because of informal and ambiguous employer-employee relations, employers and placement agencies do not orient them on the issue either - despite it being a mandate under the Law.

### Next Steps

- The baseline survey form will be completed with the women domestic workers of Devli by the field facilitator
- The survey data will be collected, shared and validated with a larger group of women domestic workers of Devli, South Delhi, through more participatory conversations, discussions and art-based activities
- The women domestic workers of Devli will continue to support each other and build solidarity around the issue in their community
- Participatory training sessions with and for women domestic workers will be conducted in Devli by field facilitators and Program staff to orient them to the SHW Act, 2013, and redressal mechanisms for their complaints