

Jashn-e-Awaaz: Finding our Voices on Women's Day! Martha Farrell Foundation staff celebrate women's day with women domestic workers in Panipat, Haryana

Date: 7th March, 2022

Place: Panipat, Haryana

Number of participants: 40 women domestic workers

Resource Persons: MFF Programme Staff

Field Facilitators: Sonia, Sapna

This year, International Women's Day at Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF) took place in full force, with pledges across-the-board to #BreaktheBias for gender equality. The MFF team travelled to the Swabhimaan Kendra¹ in Panipat, Haryana, where an event- '*Jashn-e-Awaaz*' was held with women domestic workers and their daughters. The day was envisioned as one that leads to learning about issues of sexual and gender based violence, while at the same time, celebrating womanhood.

'*Jashn-e-Awaaz*', as the name suggests, is a celebration of the voices of the marginalized. The event started with women and girls placing their identity-signifying objects on a banner. These objects included a pad with a red cloth stapled on it, bangles, *mehendi*, and flowers — all believed to be integral to the identity of women domestic workers and their daughters. This exercise was believed to be important to promote self-reflection, and identity mapping. The banner added to the colourful and lively atmosphere of the Swabhimaan Kendra.



Fig 1: KBC participant adding an identity-signifying object to the 'Jashn-e-Awaaz' banner

¹ The 'Swabhimaan Kendra' is a safe physical space for collectivisation of women domestic workers, located in Panipat, Haryana.

The Swabhimaan Kendra was also decorated with coloured flags, and a women domestic worker from Bichpari Gaon (Panipat), had also set up a stall selling trinkets such as bangles and earrings. In addition to this, MFF team members and women co-created posters which added to the decor.

Box 1: Poster-making session with mothers and daughters-

“Ma’am mujhe pata hai ki woh nahi kar sakti, rehne do na, woh nahi bana sakti” (Ma’am, believe me, she will not be able to draw anything, she is uneducated and has never used a pen) was Aditi’s response when her mother was encouraged to draw on the poster. Upon continued persistence, Aditi’s mother drew a little bird on the poster, signifying freedom, and said—*“Maine pehli baar banaya hai, pehli baar pen haath mein rakh ke kuch kiya hai.”* (This is the first time I have drawn anything using a pen).

Following this, the first activity conducted with the women and their daughters was a *mehendi* (henna) drawing session. Mehendi drawing is a common activity in the region, often building relationships, and signifying womanhood. The session allowed the women and their daughters to become comfortable in the presence of each other, as well as the MFF team. While drawing designs onto each others’ hands, conversations abounded, and also became a relationship-building activity, with music playing in the background, and women singing *bhajans* (native/folk songs) as well.



Fig 2: Women applying mehendi on each-others’ hands, strengthening relationships

As the entire day was to allow for a positivity-filled atmosphere, the next activity conducted was a Kite-flying exercise. Kite-flying is considered a traditionally “male” activity, with women and girls rarely participating. To break these gender stereotypes, mothers and daughters first wrote their dreams and aspirations on the kites, and then flew them, also symbolizing that the former would be soaring soon.

Box 2: Kite-flying activity with mothers and daughters-

“*Mujhe to pata hi nahi tha ki tujhe aur padhne ka mann tha*” (I didn’t even know that you wanted to continue studying), said Seema, whose daughter had written that she wanted to pursue higher education. Mothers and daughters (also daughters-in-law) wrote about their relationships with one another, and their dreams and aspirations. Responses included, “I hope my daughter gets married to a loving man”, “I want to start my own small business one day”, and “I hope my family always stays safe and financially secure.”



Fig 3: Mother and daughter-in-law duo Vidya and Nirmala with their dreams and aspirations written on a kite

A learning session was conducted by employees from a One-Stop Centre after the kite flying activity. The resource persons spoke about forms of gender based violence, and the kind of support provided at the one-stop centre. Helpline numbers, advice for seeking medical assistance after facing domestic violence, and information about shelter homes was also provided to the participants. Women and daughters attending the session reported that this was a valuable session in that it provided for awareness generation to mitigate the widespread instances of domestic violence in the area.

The next activity was led by girls associated with Martha Farrell Foundation’s ‘Kadam Badhate Chalo’ programme. The youth performed a *Nukkad Natak* (street play) on the topic of gender roles and discrimination, which was written and directed by themselves. The play featured a mother who focused upon prioritising her son’s education, and ignoring that of her daughter, who was made to engage with household chores. Finally, the daughter

educates herself and becomes a doctor, while the son leads an unproductive life. The girls also performed an empowering dance following the play.



Fig 4: KBC youth performing a Nukkad Natak

Women’s Day in Panipat was a successful day, where several insights were found, and it also acted as a space for relationship-building. Mothers and daughters stood in solidarity with one another, and it was also a novel experience for many. As one participant notes, “*Aaj bohaut waqt ke baad hum bahar aaye, aisi jashn manane, acche kapde pehenke.*”



Fig 5: Women domestic workers sharing moment of happiness, hope and trust