

*“Bhanwari Devi’s struggle has inspired us and given us the belief that if she can overcome challenges, so can we
(Guddi, Pehelkar, South-East Delhi)”*

Women Domestic Workers coming together in solidarity to fight against injustice: The story of Jasola Vihar

Pehalkars: The community change agents

Supported by the Martha Farrell Foundation and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, the **#मेरी** project aims to Over the course of one year field facilitators been able to identify leaders among them who can multiply the impacts of the program and enable large scale awareness on the Protection of women from sexual harassment at workplace Act 2013 on ground. The identified leaders ‘Pehelkaars’ (named by women themselves, to signify those who initiate actions) have been instrumental in supporting women in overcoming the fears and shattering the silence around the issue, and enabling awareness and providing support to other women within the communities. As members of the community themselves, the pehelkaars have been successful in building awareness and solidarity among women domestic workers around sexual harassment at workplace. They have also been successfully supporting women to take action on such incidences.

This is one such story where the Pehelkars from Jasola Vihar mobilized women domestic workers to lead the rescue of two domestic workers.

Pehelkars rescue two domestic workers in Jasola Vihar

Jasola Vihar is a locality situated in the South-Eastern part of Delhi. It is partly inhabited by the migrant populations from Jharkhand and Bihar who have migrated in search of well paying jobs. The locality has been part of the project **#मेरी** since 2021.

Pehelkars Nandni (35 years old) and Guddi (42 years old) have been residents of Jasola vihar for a decade and have been part of the project since its inception. They have been actively engaging Women Domestic Workers (WDWs) in the area on the issue of Sexual Harassment at Workplace and Gender Based Violence (GBV). They have been facilitating training and meetings with women domestic workers in their role as Pehelkaars and peer educators. During one such training on 19th September a woman stood up to ask for help to free her nieces who were being held captive by their employers in their home. She was sure that they were being denied access to all forms of communication as she had not been able to reach them for the past 15 days. Alarmed by the need to intervene, the women collectivized themselves and decided to lead a small protest outside the employers house

demanding the release of the girls. However the protest had no impact on the employer who tried to intimidate the women with verbal abuses. The Pehelkars then decided to file a complaint with the Delhi Commission for Women. Soon the police arrived and fearing harsh consequences the employer released the two girls. But they refused to release the salary that was due to them. The girls narrated how they were enduring severe deprivation and denied access to basic necessities like food and water, and access to any form of communication with anyone outside. Regrettably, when the police became involved, the women faced immediate bias and blame. The police were unwilling to consider the domestic workers' perspective and took the side of the employer who was trying to bribe the police to settle the matter. Undeterred however, the women pushed the police until they were left with no choice but to file a formal complaint against the employers.

When they reached the police station, the police tried to get out of not registering the complaint and began blaming the women for forcibly entering the employer's home with support from an NGO.

My dedication to promoting women's safety stems from the realization that I want more women to be aware of their rights and the protective laws. I aim to empower them so they never feel helpless in the face of violence. Despite the challenges of reaching domestic workers, who are already burdened with multiple responsibilities, I persist in conducting awareness campaigns and sessions. Although attention spans during these interactions may be limited, I remain committed to reinforcing laws and rules to make an impact.

—Guddi, Pehelkar, South-East Delhi

Undeterred, Guddi persisted and kept insisting that since the two women had been held captive by their employer against their will, it was a violation of their fundamental right of freedom to work and hence the employer in that case was liable to be punished. By now the police had understood that they were confronting a group of women who are empowered with information and strong resolve to fight for their rights. They agreed to file a complaint and settle the matter through the due process. The employer was asked to apologize and pay the two months' worth of salary (amounting to Rs. 25000) to both the women. The employer was compelled to acknowledge the severity of the situation: they compensated the two women with two months' worth of payment and apologized for their unlawful acts. Following up on the case the Delhi Commission for Women reached out to the two women and assured them of essential support to get domestic work in Delhi so that they could support their families. However, in less than a week from the incident, the womens' group themselves found a well paying job for their fellow workers and helped them get back to work.

Women Solidarity: A powerful force of change

This is one such successful intervention by women domestic workers where they collectivized to question the existing norms, challenge the status quo and demand and fight for their rights. The incident has just not built trust on each other but also it empowered them individually with agency and voice. They began appreciating the power of solidarity and collectivizing, they also started believing themselves as an agent of change. Throughout, they faced backlash from the employer and the police but they gained strength from each other. They demanded, advocated and negotiated for their right to work in safe and dignified workplace conditions. The incident and the fight for their rights has empowered WDWs to respond to similar situations in future. However, power plays a huge role which benefits certain sections of society but these women are now empowered to take actions in these kinds of situations where their basic rights are being violated. This will keep on inspiring other women to come together as collectives and reclaim their voice, agency and space.