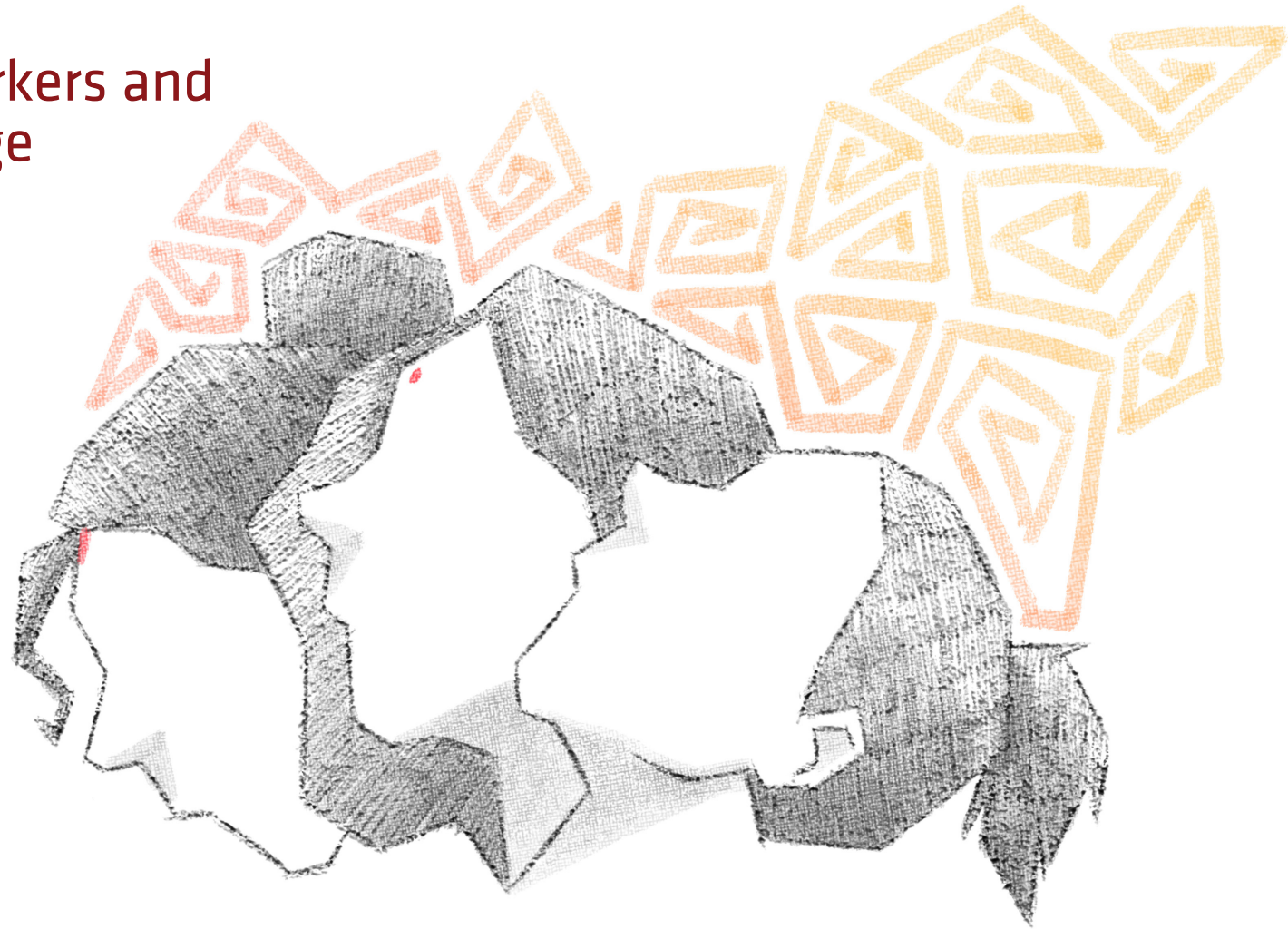
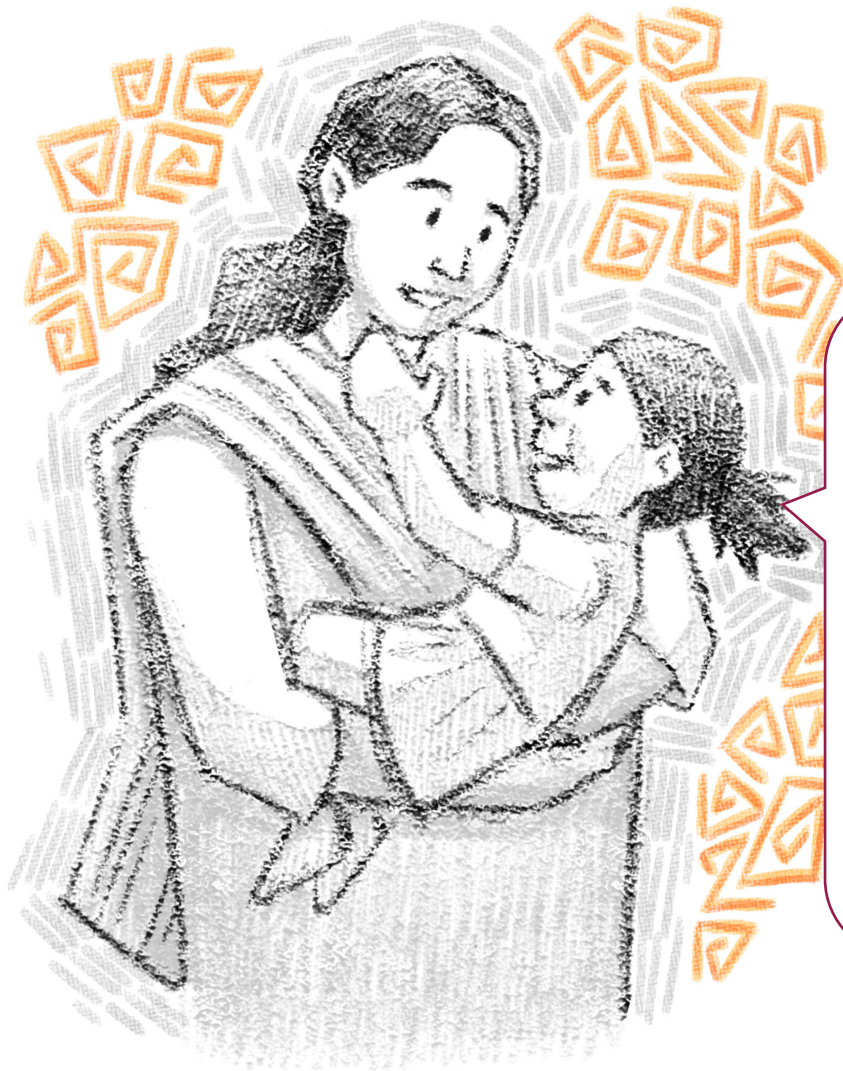


# जज़्बा

Jazba

Women domestic workers and  
their stories of courage





“ Keep my existence under wraps if you will, but I refuse to be invisible! ”

\_\_\_\_ Sarita Devi

I was 13 years old when I got married. My husband, at 14 years was as much of a child as I was. That didn't matter, it was a custom in my village. I got married and for a while, I lived in my husband's parents' home. Those were hard days for me. I conceived two children while I lived with them - my oldest daughter, who is nearly twenty years old now, and a male child, whom I lost to a miscarriage.

I remember that one day as if it were yesterday, I was nursing my newborn baby when my mother-in-law came into the room and asked me to do a few chores. I told her I would do it after I finished nursing my baby, I don't know what it was she heard but the next thing I know I was being beaten by her and my brother-in-law.

In his rage my brother-in-law kicked my stomach. I was pregnant at that time.

I was in excruciating pain for days but nobody paid any attention to me, not even my husband, I was too ashamed to tell my parents.

For almost three months, I carried a dying child in my uterus. I was severely malnourished and hungry all the time, my in-laws were not feeding me enough. The nursing along with the pregnancy was taking its toll on me. After four days of hunger, I could not take it anymore. I ran away to my parents' house, with nothing but Rs. 25 in my pocket.

## The Journey to Gurgaon

I would never have moved to Gurgaon, if it had been just my decision to make. When my husband found out that I had run away, he came to my parents' house and convinced me to move to the city with him far away from his family where I could live in peace. I agreed. He may have been well intentioned, but to be honest, even after we came here he never paid any attention to me.

He got us a house, where we lived with our daughter but he was never home. We were always alone. He spent a lot of time outside and God alone knows what he did what he did there. Whenever he came home, my daughter would follow him around the house, saying "Papa! Papa!". He didn't have much time for her then either. Can I blame him for who he was? I don't think so, because he himself was a child when we got married. What could he do if not to mimic the things he had seen in his home? Who was there to tell him otherwise?

I could never have imagined that life would turn out the way it did after our move. In the early days, the city was very unsafe, one heard stories of strange men who would enter people's homes at odd hours. In the early days, the city was very unsafe. One heard stories of men who would enter people's homes at odd hours, particularly homes where women and children were alone, to do as they wished with the women and children. I used to live in eternal fear for the safety of my daughter and myself. I remember, one of the initial Holi's that we celebrated here, my husband was completely drunk. Men were roaming around everywhere, drunk and out of control. I was so scared that I spent the entire day locked in the bathroom with my daughter.

We shifted from the first house we lived in because of the landlord. He would stare at me shamelessly and come into the house as and when he liked. He was constantly lurking and lingering around the house. He made me extremely uncomfortable. The house we moved to overlooked a dumpyard in the colony. We moved from there because I didn't want my second daughter, who was born there, to grow up playing with garbage. I wanted a better life for my children.

It took us a few more moves to find somewhere remotely comfortable and safe in the basti. During this time, my third child, a son was born. My husband and in-laws were overjoyed, and wanted me to have another one. They told me to keep trying for another son. They even said I should abort the child if it was a

girl. I refused. I could not afford to have another child. In secret, I had a birth control surgery done. My husband was set against the operation, but it was my choice to get it done. So I did it.

## Stepping Out to Work

Being cooped up in the house with my daughter, and living in fear were not how I imagined my life to be. So I decided to change things around. I put my daughter in school, and took up a full day job, one where I would be working at least 12 hours a day. I learned many things, and none of the lessons came easy. "Jitna dhakka laga, utni hi buddhi badhi." (I learnt much from all the challenges I faced)

Men were the bane of my existence. Even the ones who told me they would help me get a job, would later tell me they loved me, and ask me to run away with them. What did they understand by love? Who did they think they were?

Guards would sexually harass me. In fact, there was one who would constantly ask me to elope with him. My own brother-in-law would look at me with desire. I always wondered why my husband never cared about these things. How was he alright ignoring what was happening right in front of his eyes?

I called my brother and my parents to Gurgaon to help me and once these men got to know that I was not alone, they stopped harassing me. My husband also slowly changed, and became more attentive. While I was pregnant with my second daughter, he was far more attentive than before. Together, we began to work towards securing our daughters' lives. We even bought a plot of land.

While my life was slowly changing, my workplace remained frightening. It was never really free of violence. I had a good relationship with some of my employers, but with others, there were issues. My caste became a barrier in many homes, I even had to drink water from a separate cup that was kept just for me.

## Moving On/Growing Up

With time, things have changed. The work I did with the Martha Farrell



Foundation and one very kind, very empowering employer's efforts changed my outlook to life. I learned to stop being afraid, I learned to question and demand what was owed to me. I pushed my daughters to study and become better than I am, to shape better experiences for themselves. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I worked hard to make sure that the women of my community were provided for - I spearheaded the Foundation's relief efforts in my community. I went door-to-door to collect names and verify their needs, and made sure every house that had a dire need received the rations and relief.

Today, I am an independently earning woman who is an equal bread-winner in the family. I've reconciled to an extent with my in-laws. I now own land and I

have savings. My children's lives have been secured by me.

You know, there's no value for a woman's life, where I come from. Women toil away all day without any recognition. And men? They just need to look a certain way and the world rushes to congratulate them.

But I refute this. My life has value. I have done and accomplished, just as every other woman has in her own life, in her own way. The question is, when will the world start paying attention to women like us?



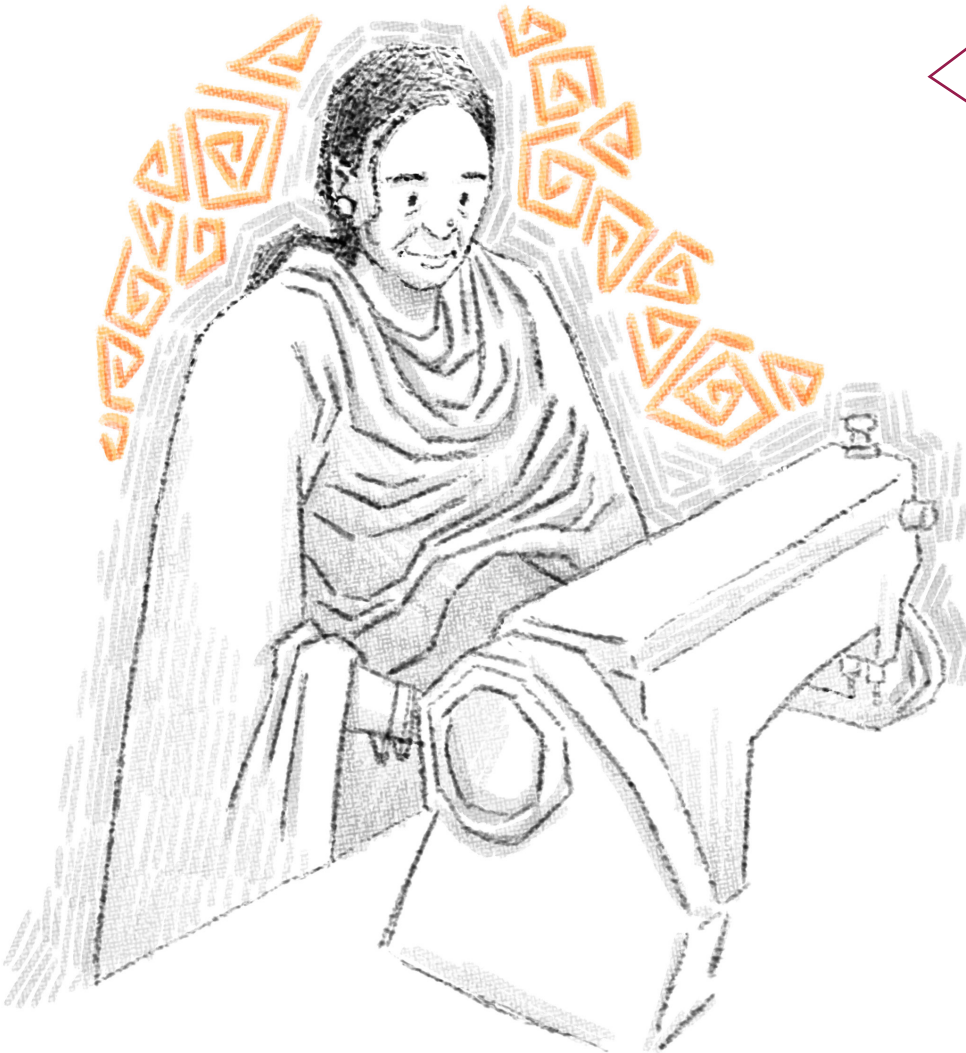




## Child Bride to Businesswoman and Community Leader: How I Turned My Life Around using Sui and Dhaga



— Akhalema Bibi



My name is Akhalema Bibi. I am a 48-year-old small business owner living in Harijan Basti, a small, clustered settlement nestled amidst the high-rise apartments of Gurgaon's posh Sector 42.

I was born and raised in Raiganj, a village in Malda, West Bengal. I am one of two siblings, both girls. My father who was a labourer needed support in the running of the house and given that he had no sons decided to get me married.

I was only nine when I married my cousin. As is the custom in my community, he came to live with us after marriage and began to work in the house and support my parents. He was eighteen years old when we were married, double my age.

My marriage changed my life in many ways. For one, it put a stop to my formal education. I was in class three when I was taken out of formal school and put in a religious school. Back then, schools didn't teach English to students until class five, so I never really learned the language.

Marriage also made me quieter and more afraid. I was afraid of even talking to my husband. I think the first time I really spoke to him was when I was fourteen years old, five years after our marriage. And once I learned to open my mouth and speak, my marital life was never peaceful. We began to have several arguments and fights, which has continued through the years. Of late, my husband has begun drinking, which has just made matters worse.

By the time I was seventeen years old, I was a mother of four. When I found out I was pregnant with my fourth child, I told my mother I didn't want to carry the child to term. But she asked me not to terminate my pregnancy in the hopes of having a second grandson. My fourth child also turned out to be a girl and I love her with all my heart.

My husband married another woman and sent me and our children to his parents' house. He shrugged off all responsibility and left us in his parents' care. His parents were not well off, there was no money coming into the house. I was worried about my children's futures - who would take care of them? Ultimately, the responsibility did fall on my shoulders entirely. My in-laws supported my husband despite all that he was doing. When I did object, they told me "How dare you say such things to our son?"

That's when I decided to take matters into my own hands.

## Learning to Sew

There was a man in my village who used to stitch clothes for a living, I liked his work. I asked him if he could teach me how to stitch. He agreed and I began to learn under him. However, I soon noticed something in his behaviour that made me very uncomfortable. For instance, he would touch me unnecessarily on the pretext of teaching me. So, for my own safety, I stopped going to his shop.

Instead, I asked a woman in my village who knew how to knit to teach me. I began doing odd jobs around her house such as cooking and cleaning, while learning from her. I first learned how to knit sweaters, and through this process I began to understand how to shape clothes, how to make the arms and the neck accurately - it helped me understand how to make blouses and other clothes as well.

On my mother's advice, I began stitching. I practiced using my father's old lungi (traditional Indian garment worn by men) first and made her a blouse. Minor issues aside, it came out quite well. So, my mother gave me some new cloth that she had purchased for herself, and I made her a blouse out of that as well. It came out so well that people in the community started encouraging my parents to buy me a sewing machine - they said I would be able to fetch a good income if I learned how to use it.

My father put his earnings together and bought me a second-hand machine for Rs. 3000. I began to use it and slowly, my clientele in the village grew. I learned and perfected the craft of sewing quite quickly. It became my sustenance and with the money I earned from sewing, I raised my children. It didn't really matter whether my husband was there or not, my single-handed efforts were enough for us.

## Navigating Life in the City

After I got my second daughter married, I was left with a hefty loan to pay off. The income from sewing in my village fell short, and I began to worry about paying it off by myself. It was at this time that a relative who lived in the city,

suggested that I migrate to Gurgaon. He told me that a suit piece that I stitched for Rs. 80 in the village would fetch me up to Rs. 300 - 400, nearly five times the amount if I was selling the same in the city.

Although I was filled with doubts and fear, I decided to take up his suggestion and move to the city. It took a lot of courage to make the move. Nearly everyone in my family was opposed to my decision because they felt it was too dangerous. My father even offered to sell the land he had and give me the money to pay off my loan. But I was determined and besides, I didn't want my father to sell his land. Without the land, what did we really have to fall back on? With these thoughts in my mind, I moved to Harijan Basti in Gurgaon nearly seven years ago.

I had the contact of a boutique owner with me, who employed me when I came to the city. I used to make Rs. 7000 for working eight hours a day with her, initially. A year later, she reduced my working hours to six hours a day and increased my salary to Rs. 9000. When the number of hours reduced, I started to work independently on the side, to earn more money.

The city was very frightening to navigate initially. I was afraid to interact with people in the first few months. But I learned the ropes by and by, and found it to be kinder than the village, especially in terms of my income and savings. I managed to work my way through the debts that had accumulated after my daughters' wedding and in the past year, I was also able to build a house for myself in the village with my savings.

## A Turbulent Home Front

Where my professional life was improving, life at home continued to be as difficult as ever. My husband, who continues to live with and off me, has always given me a very hard time at home. He has now taken a second wife. She currently works as a full-time domestic worker in a bungalow in Gurgaon, near Harijan Basti.

My husband never worked, yet he carried on borrowing money. Initially, my father-in-law and father paid off his debts. But my husband remained irresponsible and difficult. Once, he even sold a plot of land that my father owned to pay off his debts. When I confronted him about it, all he said was that



he needed the money.

Many people ask me why I don't just leave my husband. I didn't really need him, after all. My income was enough for my family to get by. But I stayed with him for a different reason - men had already asked me to elope with them, saying they loved me, back at the village as well as in the city. I stayed with him to keep them at bay. Who knows what they might do if they find out that I've left him and am single.

To be honest, I wish I had never got married. After all, I am earning and independent. What do I really need a husband for? I work day and night and am forced to listen to his abuse, his suspicions and interrogation and his lack of trust. All this, even though I pay the rent, I buy the food, and I send money back to the village to help my mother.

To make matters worse, my son has also turned out like his father - he doesn't treat my daughter-in-law well. Today, she's left him and like me, she earns and looks after herself and her children.

## Challenges with COVID

COVID-19 brought its own set of challenges to my life. When the first wave struck, I had returned home to my village to get a house built for myself. I had assumed I would be gone for four months, so I had paid my landlord in advance for my shop before leaving.

But because of the lockdown, I ended up staying there for six months. My landlord refused to wait for me to return and pay the rent, he said he would take my things as compensation. I asked him to hold on just a little longer, but he refused. In my absence, he entered my house and took away my things including my sewing machines. He sold things worth Rs. 30,000 - 40,000 from my house. I was very angry, and wanted to vacate the shop, but the pandemic had eaten quite a bit into my savings. I returned to the city and continued to rent the same shop, to make the money back. I worked hard, but the expenses were piling up. Moreover, the landlord increased the rent to Rs. 7000 from Rs. 5000. He asked me to leave if I couldn't pay the extra amount, but how could I? I had no option but to continue to work there.

## Joining Forces with Like-Minded Women

During the Second Wave of COVID-19, at a time when work had come to a standstill, I began working with the Martha Farrell Foundation. As a part of a Relief Drive for women domestic workers, I began stitching masks. I stitched 4000 masks over two months, which became a key source of income and sustenance for me during that time. It wasn't just a job though, it brought me closer to the women in my basti (community). It gave me a sense of strength and solidarity with them.

Through the work that began, I also joined a group of women in the community to build a Resource and Support Center for the women here. I have organised meetings in the center, mobilised women to join and through all of this, my identity has evolved and become something bigger, better.

Today, every woman in the basti knows my name. They call me when they face challenges. They trust me to help them. And it makes me happy to be able to help.

The work with the women has also sharpened my aspirations and helped me plan for my future - I aspire to expand my business further in the coming years and train women from the community to join me in this journey. I am confident that together, we will be successful in whatever we set our minds to.

My name is Rozi and I belong to a village near Kolkata in Nadiya district of West Bengal. I am a twenty-nine year old small business owner, living in Harijan Basti, an urban village near Gurgaon's posh DLF Phase 5 locality.

I was just ten years old when I first moved to Gurgaon from my village. I came here with my brother and sister, both of whom were married. I didn't really want to move to the city, but my sister was pregnant at the time and needed help with her household chores, so she brought me along with her.

Initially, when we got here, I would do the housework and play with other children during my free time. My parents couldn't afford to send me to school, so there was really nothing much that I could do other than this.

By and by, my sister showed me the ropes of living in the new city. The initial fear I had felt about the city started to reduce, and I began to enjoy life here, in Gurgaon.

In the first few years, we lived in a jhuggi (informal slum settlement) near a temple in Gurgaon. After a few years, we moved to Harijan Basti, an urban village settlement amid Gurgaon's posh high-rises. It's been fifteen years since, and I still live here.

## Finding Work in the New City

My sister helped me find work after we shifted to the basti. I was just twelve or thirteen years old then and was employed as a domestic worker in a bungalow nearby. My first employer was kind to me. Since I didn't understand the local language and was proficient only in Bengali, she taught me the little Hindi I know. She also helped me learn the work in the house, and after I picked it up, she recommended me to her friends. Soon, I was able to take up work in two-three houses, at a salary of Rs. 800 a month per house. The salary was meagre even though I did all the cleaning work, but I had no option but to stick

“ I started working at the age of 10 as a domestic worker. Today, I'm a community leader and the proud owner of my own business ”

— Rozi



with it.

A year or two later, my mother fell very ill. Around the same time, my brother-in-law also abandoned my sister. We both returned home for a few months to take care of my mother. I lost most of my jobs when I took the break. Only one employer retained me when I returned a few months later. I worked full time at their house for a year before I got married.



## Tying the Knot for Love

I was just fourteen years old when I got married. It was a love marriage. We had both met each other in the community and fallen in love.

My husband is from a different community than ours, so it became very challenging to get my family to accept our relationship. My brothers were dead set against it, particularly because I was so young. But my husband and I were both adamant - we loved one another and at that time, that's all that mattered to us.

My family never really consented to our marriage. So, one day, we both just eloped and went back to my husband's village in Bihar. There, we got married among his community members. We couldn't get it registered legally because I hadn't attained the legal age for marriage. We didn't want the police to get involved. To date, we remain married without any legal paperwork to show for it.

My family, of course, was very angry about the way things had turned out, but my husband went to them and reassured them that I was safe and well in his village.

## From Domestic Worker to a Business Owner

When I returned to the city after the wedding, I had lost all employment. Over the years of working as a domestic worker, I realised that while there were many good employers out there, there were also some who were very unpleasant to work with. I had had employers who were incredibly kind and thoughtful, and would always offer me meals and support, knowing the circumstances me and my family came from. But others wouldn't even treat me like a human being.

For a few months, I returned to work as a domestic worker, now armed with a new skill - cooking. I learned it from my husband, who is a cook himself. But it was short term because I soon became pregnant and was unable to continue working.

I had always wanted a more independent work life, in which I had a lot more control over my holidays, my work timings and more. So, I decided not to return

to working as a domestic worker after having my children.

Instead, I used our savings to set up a stall on a pushcart in the community market selling food. I began making and selling paratha, eggs and biryani. Setting it up was not an easy task. For one, I was doing it at a time when hardly any women took up such ventures - such eateries are traditionally perceived as a 'man's territory' in the community - and I found I was the only woman in the long line of stalls. More pressing was the question of my safety. Running the stall meant having to constantly put up with sexual harassment by random men who would show up.

Challenging as it was, I found myself quite up to the task. Not only did I become an expert at selling the snacks I cooked, but I also discovered that I could also be extremely bold. I have beaten up many men who tried to sexually harass me while I was working. I am used to being blamed, gossiped about, and bad-mouthed by people when things like this happen to me. But I have always felt that I have done nothing wrong and if I know I'm doing the right thing, things will fall into place.

## Challenges with COVID

After a few years of hard work at the stall - about seven years ago - I achieved another milestone event in my life. I pooled our household savings and set up a small shop in the community that we live in.

A more permanent venture as compared to the stall, my shop is the one place in the basti where people can purchase delicious fast food - I make and sell samosas, pakodas, eggs, momos and chow mein. I run the shop jointly with my husband.

But when the pandemic struck, our earnings from the shop dwindled. After the lockdown, my husband had to take up employment as a cook in two households in addition to the shop work, so we could make ends meet.

Since the lockdown, I have also become a part of the Resource and Support Center set up by women domestic workers in our basti. Supported by the Martha Farrell Foundation, it is a wonderful space for us, and I truly enjoy being a part of the community of women here. I learn from them and I take my knowledge of running a business to them. Together, we have made plans to find alternative

sources of income, such as beginning to sell chicken from my shop. I have already begun planning for it, particularly how I will publicise it, to grow the business.

My aspiration is to earn well and build a house for our family, where we can be happy. I have two children to think about - a son, who is 14 years old and a daughter, who is in the 9th grade. My daughter wants to become a doctor. My son is not too strong with his academics, but I am determined that they will

study and earn well and lead better lives than me and my husband.

My daughter is my pride and joy. I believe that girls - and women - are bright by nature. They will do well in whatever they set their minds to. If you give a boy Rs. 1000, he will spend it in a heartbeat, but if you give a girl even Rs. 500, she will use it judiciously and even manage to save some of it. I work and do all that I do, to help my children achieve their dreams, and lead full and happy lives.

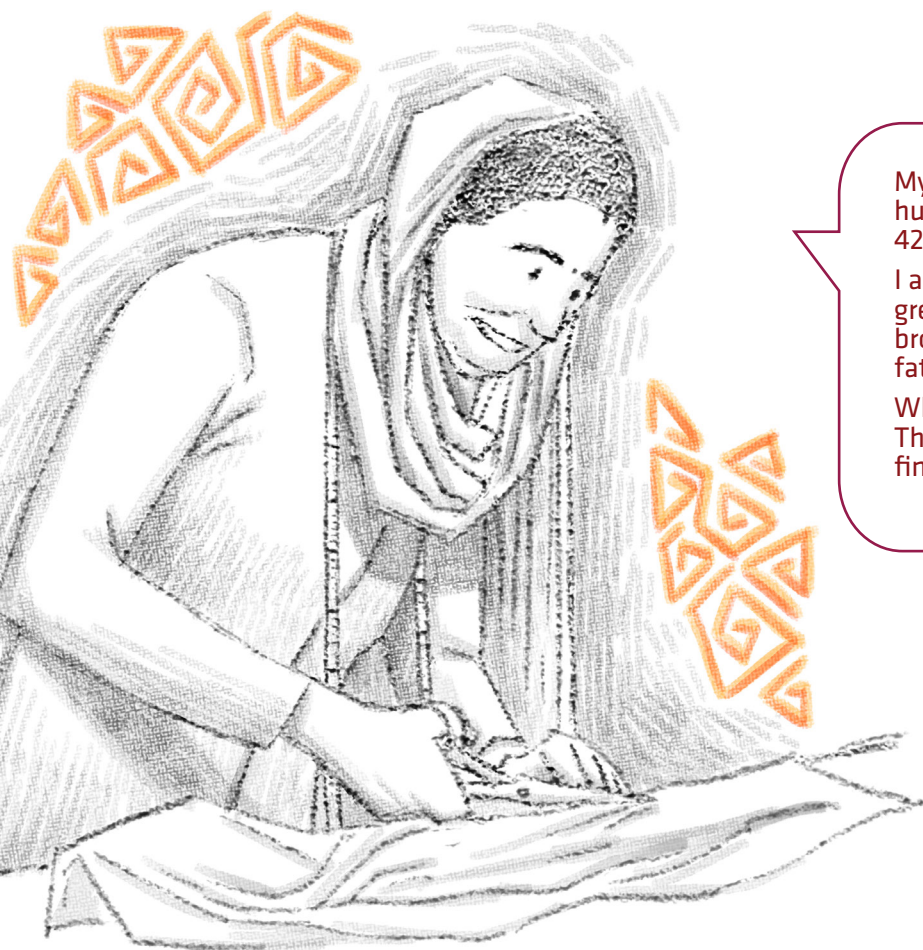


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**Married at 16, how I learned to sew and became a small business owner**

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Sanjana



My name is Sanjana. I am a 22-year-old seamstress and I live with my husband and children in Harijan Basti, an urban village in the heart of Sector 42, Gurgaon.

I am originally from Dhatir, a small village in Palwal district of Haryana. I grew up in a large family of eight members - my parents, five sisters and a brother. I had a pleasant childhood, but things really changed when my father passed away.

When we lost him, I really had to come to terms with the struggles of life. Things that he and my mother had worked hard to protect us from - financial stress, compromise and adjustments became a part of our lives.

## An Arranged Marriage

I was just 16 years old when my family arranged my marriage. I did not know who it was I was going to be marrying. All I knew was that he was known to one of my relatives, and that he was a good match for me.

I also got to know that my husband, is two years older to me and lives with his mother and four brothers in the city in Gurgaon. One brother lived in another city.

Initially, my uncles were worried about sending me, a young girl, to live in a house with three men other than my husband. I, too, was quite afraid before my wedding. But that's how it used to be in our community.

I didn't see or speak to my husband before we were married. In fact, I wasn't even able to see his face during the wedding ceremonies. In our community, all marriage functions are conducted with the faces of the bride and groom covered. The first time I saw my husband was two days after I was married to him.

After my wedding, we moved to Gurgaon to live with my husband's family. The initial years of my marriage were difficult. In our community, if a woman doesn't conceive a child in the first few years of marriage, people begin to talk. Even if I wanted to plan, save and then conceive, the option wasn't there for me.

I should have waited before getting pregnant, but to avoid the gossip and giving in to the pressure, my husband and I conceived soon after the wedding. I was only 16 when I had my first miscarriage. I suffered two miscarriages in the first two years of my marriage.

It was only after the second miscarriage that I learned what one is supposed to do when they're pregnant - how to sit, how to stand, how to care for oneself. I learned from my own mistakes and judgements because there was no one to teach me. No one had ever really spoken to me about these things.

I was consulting with a doctor in Wazirabad in Gurgaon, she was the one who really helped me with my third pregnancy. She was an immense help to me and helped me through the entire pregnancy. She's the sole reason my daughter and son are alive and healthy today.

## Learning to Sew

Right after I got married, I realised that my husband's income wouldn't be enough for the family. Besides, the house itself was not conducive or safe for me. There was a lot of stress in the family, especially after my husband started to drink. He would change jobs frequently and spend all his earning on alcohol. Although it was a new city and I was unaccustomed to many things here, I decided to learn a new skill and contribute to the household income.

I decided to learn how to sew. There was a woman who was conducting sewing classes in Wazirabad at the time, so I would travel there to learn. Sometimes I really wonder how I came up with the idea to begin sewing and to have the resolve to travel for the classes - I was so young then. Although she took the sessions for a month, I was able to attend only twelve or thirteen classes with her. Yes, sometimes I skipped a class because I didn't want to travel so far for it, and it was also at that the time when I suffered my first miscarriage, so my health would only permit me that much time to learn. But I am so glad today that I somehow stuck through with it and learned how to do it.

I began sewing inside the house since women in the family did not work outside the house. But during lockdown when money and food was so scarce that I was scared for the survival of our children, I gathered all my courage and took my machine and placed it outside the house. Out of all the shops and businesses I was the only one working outside. I figured that I would be in a better position to get more business if I was outside.

I have been working as a seamstress for eight years now. I contribute to the finances of the household as an equal partner. Learning to sew was a great decision, but sometimes I wonder what would happen if I took up a new skill. Perhaps, it would improve our circumstances even further.

## Looking to the Future

Life has become quite routine now. I have learned to live with the challenges. I just work hard and do the best I can.

Sometimes, I think about how I would tell my mother off in my childhood.

I would ask her: 'Why are you like this? You never do anything for us!' But today, as a working mother, I realise how much she must have struggled and how tough life must have been for her.

I look back at the life I have led so far and I can proudly say that despite so many

adversities, I have become a very strong and independent woman. Life has really taught me to face the challenges and keep moving forward. And that's exactly what I intend to do.



## Forced to drop out of school to get married, how I'm rediscovering myself with the women of my basti



— Anjana



My name is Anjana, and I am from Mathura in Uttar Pradesh. I grew up there in a big family, I had three brothers. All of us went to school there, but it wasn't a very good school. It was a local school and generally, the education we received in that school was not up to the mark. I can read and write, I have completed my studies till the tenth grade, but the job market is too competitive. Employers don't hire people who've studied in schools such as ours.

When I was sixteen years old, I had just completed my tenth grade, and my parents got me married. My husband belonged to a Rajasthani family, living in Alwar. Although my wedding took place in Mathura, I had to move with my husband to his village right after that. We lived with my in-laws for a few months after the marriage.

I found life in Alwar to be quite difficult. I was a sixteen-year-old who had never been to Rajasthan. I didn't even know the language. My husband's family was very big, he had three brothers and one sister, and all of them were younger to him. As the eldest daughter-in-law, caring for all of them and taking care of the house was my responsibility. I couldn't adjust to this life, and in just a couple of months after my wedding, I returned to my parents' house in Mathura.

I lived with my family for 4-5 months and around that time, my husband and his family decided to migrate to Delhi in search of better earning opportunities. When I returned to my husband, it was to them in Delhi. That was back in 2003.

My husband's family had initially moved to his relatives' house in Delhi. That's where I also lived when I came back. Once again, taking care of the family became my responsibility. I used to cook, clean and dry everyone's clothes and take care of the house here too. My in-laws, my brothers-in-law and my husband all went to work during the day. Despite that, we didn't have much income. In that situation, trying to pursue my studies became a very distant dream for me.

My husband's relatives were also very difficult to live with. One day, they even threw me out of the house, saying that I hadn't paid them any rent. I used to put aside some money in a women's self help group committee back then, just Rs. 2000 a month. At the end of the year, my money had increased to Rs. 60,000. My husband's relatives kept all of that for themselves in lieu of rent.



## Moving to Gurgaon

A few months after we moved to Delhi, one of my brothers-in-law moved out of our home to Gurgaon. He had got a good work opportunity there. Living with my husband's relatives had become so difficult that very soon, my husband and I decided to follow my brother-in-law and move to Gurgaon too. In a few months, the rest of his family also followed.

Once again, household responsibilities fell on my shoulders. Gurgaon was dominated by forest land back then. The first house we lived in was in an informal slum. It was a very difficult place to live in. I had to step out for water, and sometimes even that was not available.

In Delhi, my husband had been working in a hardware store and drawing a pittance. We decided not to pursue such jobs in Gurgaon. Instead, we set up a little ironing shop right outside the house where we lived.

Many women in the community in Gurgaon at the time were taking up domestic work to contribute to the household income. But I wasn't allowed to do this. In my husband's family, women aren't allowed to go out and work in other people's homes. They said they feared for our safety. I had also heard frightening stories of women who had been sexually harassed on the way and back from work, and some even by their employers. Consequently, domestic work was not an option any of us considered.

Luckily, our ironing shop did well. We began to draw a small, but consistent earning. It is with the income from the shop that I took care of all my husband's siblings. I was able to pay for their weddings, as well. I do the ironing with my husband, but he's the one who picks up and delivers the clothes to people's homes.

I had to learn how to iron clothes on-the-job. I had no choice, as we needed the money. There were so many responsibilities on our shoulders, after all.

A few years after living in this place, my husband and I had made enough money to move to Harijan Basti, a small colony amidst upcoming high rises in the city's posh DLF area.

## Raising my Children Equally

Life went on uneventfully for a while, and then in 2006, I had my first-born, a daughter. She became the center of our lives. At this point, all my brothers- and sister-in-law had either got married or moved away. It's only recently, in 2013, that my youngest brother-in-law got married to Sanjana, and they moved in with us again.

I had a second daughter a few years after my first, but she died within six months of her birth. I still don't know exactly what happened to her, but she had become very unwell. We left no stone unturned in trying to find a cure. We visited hospitals in Gurgaon, in Delhi and even in Mathura. We even got her admitted to a hospital there for a week. But she didn't survive. I was heartbroken.

In 2013, we had a son. He is just eight years old now and very naughty. He doesn't like to study, and he is not afraid of me at all. He only listens to his father.

My daughter, on the other hand, is a very good child. She studies well and is very responsible. She wants to be a police officer when she grows up.

I decided when I had her that she wouldn't have to sacrifice her education and aspirations like I had done. I want her to study, I want both my children to study and become something. I don't restrict her from wearing the clothes she wants to wear or to go out. All these notions about how women should dress and that they should remain in their homes - all that is from a time gone by. My daughter and son are raised equally, and both have the option to study, earn and be what they want.

People in our community constantly tell me I should get my daughter married. They say that if she becomes too independent, she won't ever find a husband. But my husband and I don't pay attention. I tell her, "Study as much as you can and work hard. Choose whatever you want to do. Marriage is not a priority."

So long as they don't do anything wrong, and they don't hurt other people, my children are free to be and do whatever they want.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, my husband and I would together iron nearly 200 clothes a day. He was also working part-time as a delivery agent, so we were drawing a sufficient income to send both our children to a private school.

But we lost our income almost completely in the lockdown. We were forced to

shift both my children to the government school. People suggested that I only shift my daughter to a government school, a government school, and let my son continue studying in private school, but I will not do that to my daughter. I believe that if a child is a good student, they will study well, regardless of the kind of institution they are in.

## Finding a Support System in Harijan Basti

It was after the lockdown that I became associated with the community Resource and Support Center for and by women in the Basti. I had heard about the group of women before, but I only actively became a part of it after the lockdown. My sister-in-law Sanjana and I make it a point to take out time to attend the meetings.

I like belonging to this community of women. They are my friends and support system, and I enjoy learning and growing with them. What we're doing here makes me hopeful that we women can achieve whatever we put our minds to.

Many of my friends have even come up with business ideas as a part of the centre. I may not have the time to do anything of the sort myself, but I love supporting the women who do. Being with them has changed me significantly. I am more motivated and more courageous now. They make me believe in myself and my capabilities.

“ From a fisherman’s daughter to a proud domestic worker and small business owner: my story of change ”

Basanti

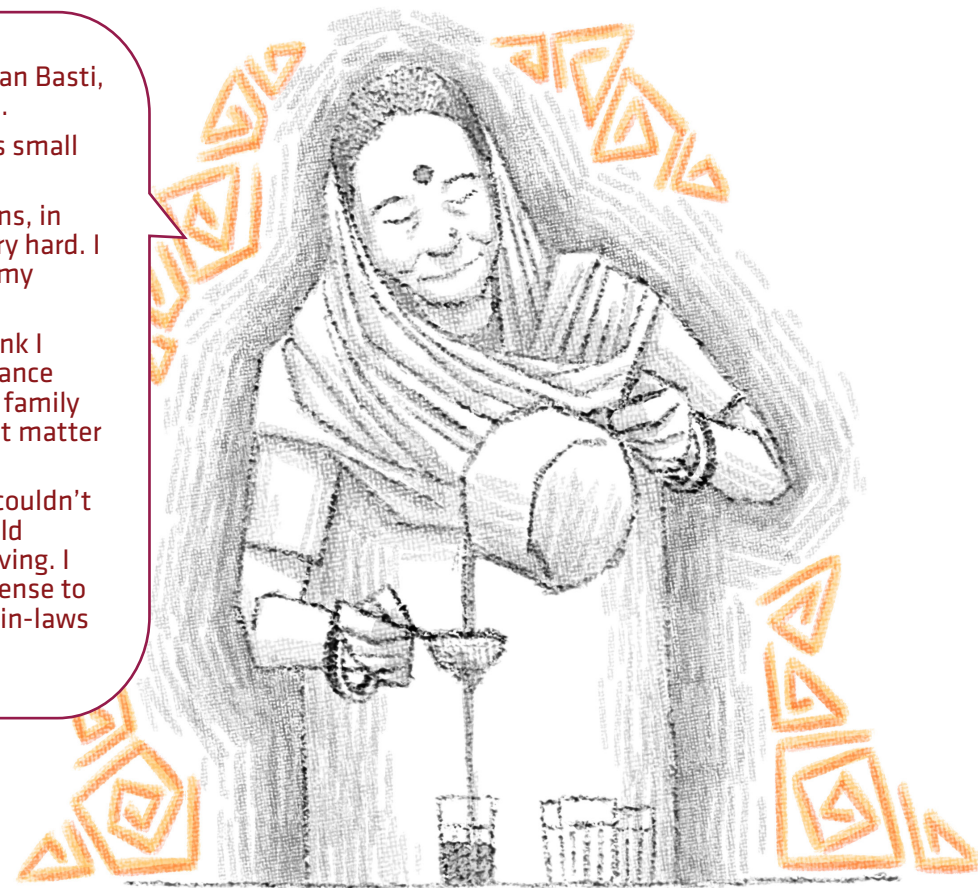
My name is Basanti and I am 38 years old. My profession is domestic work. I live in Harijan Basti, a clustered colony settlement in Sector 52, Gurgaon where I have been living for 13 years.

I am currently working in apartments in the high-rise condominiums that surrounds this small Basti of domestic workers.

Life is very hectic and chaotic in the city. I often think of my home back in the Sunderbans, in West Bengal. My life was very different then. My father was a fisherman and worked very hard. I began work at a very young age supporting my father and my mother in selling the fish my father caught. Life was hard but it was very peaceful. I was happy.

But I was married off at the age of thirteen and sent off to live with my new family. I think I would have continued to live in West Bengal, if it were not for the unfortunate circumstance that I faced during my marriage, forcing me to leave my home. We used to live in a joint family with my in-laws which meant that I was never free from harassment and abuse. It didn't matter how much I was doing, the violence never stopped.

I used to be a very quiet person at the time, and so never spoke up against the abuse. I couldn't muster the courage to say anything to them. But one day, after completing my household chores, as I was just sitting by myself, I began reflecting and questioning the life I was living. I asked myself why I was being treated this way and why I was so silent? It didn't make sense to me then to continue living that way. That's when I decided I didn't want to live with my in-laws anymore. This fleeting thought soon became a determined plan.



## Getting to know Gurgaon

I knew that my brother and his wife lived in Gurgaon, so I decided that that's where I wanted to go. My husband agreed to accompany me and for the first time in my life, I left my hometown with my husband and my children. When I came to Gurgaon, like many other women who had migrated from the village for a better life, I too was very naive and felt quite vulnerable and scared.

My brother helped me set up my house and settle in, but I wanted to do something to contribute to the household expenses, so I took up jobs in different households as a domestic worker.

Domestic work was tough, especially because my employers weren't empathetic. But I kept going, and the job helped me adjust to life in the city. I wanted to work hard for my children, that really pushed me. Though I worked in many houses, the money wasn't enough. So, I decided to invest in a small tea shop, selling tea and snacks to people in the community, after my work in the apartments.

## Life as a small business owner

Life was not easy as a domestic worker and I find it's the same even as a small business owner. My workplace - particularly the tea stall - is not safe for me. I have been sexually harassed by men while working there. Sometimes, drunken men also come and harass me. Every single day I go to work, I am petrified at the thought of what I will encounter. But I can't really stop, can I?

Despite the fact that I bring home an additional income, there's little support from my husband. To him, running a business is a man's domain.

But I can't just stop, can I? My husband and son in law have both taken loans and it's my income alone that's helping them pay them off. Besides, watching the young women of the community also taking up small business ventures of their own makes me feel more empowered and inspired to continue.

I hardly get an hour's rest in the day though. And my husband still doesn't take my contribution to the household seriously. We fight a lot. In the last few years I've lost a lot of weight because of the constant stress within and outside the home.

Even today, I believe that the income I bring in by working in three households and the tea shop together prevent our household from turning into a violent and unsafe space for my children. I've often observed that domestic violence increases among families that are facing economic struggles.

## Raising my daughter for a better life

I have two children, a son and a daughter. Both are educated. I decided early that they absolutely must have the things that I couldn't have. My son works in housekeeping in the apartments and my daughter works as a nail artist in a beauty salon at the mall nearby. Having faced so much violence and stress in my life, I always wanted a better life for her.

But my daughter's life too, was fraught with such struggles. She was married to a man from my hometown. Initially, he seemed like a kind and caring man, and a good match for her. But after their wedding, he changed. He forced her to quit her job and began physically abusing her.

He began drinking and gambling, beating and harassing my daughter on a daily basis. These things are normalised in our community - in so many cases, women are forced to continue to live with the routine torture and violence.

But I hadn't brought my daughter up with such love and care, just to watch her go through such violence. I insisted that she leave her husband and move back in with me.

She lived with me for a few years, before standing on her feet. Now she earns and is independently managing her home and caring for her children.

No matter what, we are there for one another. We support and inspire each other to achieve whatever we put our minds to.

## Looking towards a bright future

Through my life, I have also realised that I have a bigger vision for myself - of an alternative sustainable livelihood for myself and the women of the community that I live in. As a part of a group of like-minded, strong and inspiring women in the community, I've realised that I can actually do this, and I needn't do it alone. I can do it with my friends and sisters.

We've already begun planning and working together towards achieving our goals. I have felt more connected with the women of the basti, since we began. We've really come together as a group. Our business plan brought us together in the beginning, but now we have also developed a very strong bond.

As women, we will always stand together and support each other through thick and thin.



## “ Finding My Community with the Women of Harijan Basti ”

*Mamoni*



My name is Mamoni. I am a domestic worker living in Gurgaon's Harijan Basti, a colony near the city's posh Sector 42.

I grew up in a very small village called Tehatta in Nadia district of West Bengal. The people in my village are very conservative. In most cases, when a girl is born, parents feel burdened, they begin to worry about her marriage right at the time of birth. I have often heard the words 'getting rid of' associated with people's daughters and their marriages in my village. My parents were also no different.

I always wanted to study but my education was not given any priority as is the situation for all girls in our village. Girls' education is the absolute last priority in my village. I know how to read a little Bangla, but I wish I could have continued studying.

Instead of making me study, I was married off at the young age of thirteen years. I had had my first child, a son by the time I had completed my fifteenth birthday. A few years down the line, I became pregnant again, and I had a daughter this time.

After this, I didn't want to have any more children, despite the fact that it was expected off me. I faced a lot of backlash from my husband and in-laws for taking that decision. But I stuck to it, despite all the odds.

## Migrating to the City

My family and I decided to move to Faridabad in Haryana in 2006, when my daughter was 3 years old. Many people from my village had already migrated to this city and had told us of the many opportunities there. I was particularly interested in the fact that all their children were studying.

We too decided to migrate in search of better earning opportunities so that we could ensure that the children had good education. The first year that we moved was quite good overall. My husband got a job as a guard in the building nearby. After an initial period, he also began his own business - a small, sweet shop in the colony.

But as time passed, my husband began to change. I am not sure what brought it on. He began drinking and his behaviour made me very uncomfortable. He began drinking almost every night and beat me. This became routine, until one day after he beat me, he went out to buy vegetables and didn't come back.

I waited three months for him, but there was absolutely no news. Much later, I found out that he had married another woman, and was living with her. From the land of many opportunities, Faridabad now became a place that began to haunt me. Unable to take it anymore, I decided to leave.

## Living in Gurgaon

I brought my children with me and moved to Gurgaon to start life afresh. It has now been twelve years since I began living in Gurgaon. I have been working as a domestic worker and earning for myself and my children over these years. I currently work in five households.

Working as a domestic worker has not been easy. I struggled a lot initially to find work, and when I found it, I was paid a very low wage. I had no prior experience working in people's homes, and that was something my employers constantly made me aware of.

I was also living alone as a single woman, which came with its own share of challenges. I often feel very unsafe in the colony, even inside my own house. On multiple occasions, I have faced sexual harassment on the streets.

My work within and outside the house also leaves me with very little time for my children. Both my children are in school. I work very hard to make sure that they continue to study, learn, grow and make something of themselves. I want them to have a better future than mine. But I regret not being able to sit

down with them and find out more about their lives.

I do face a lot of criticism from my neighbours and friends for that and also because I also work late nights. I don't have a choice, I am determined to give a better life to my children.

## Finding Friends in the Midst of a Pandemic

The pandemic had a huge impact on our lives. I lost work in all the households I was working in during the first wave. I was fighting to survive every day. No one came forward to support me, not my family and not my friends. I was forced to take loans from my brother, and I had to work twice as hard to pay them off, which was challenging because of the lack of jobs available to domestic workers. We were the first to lose our jobs in the pandemic.

By the time the second wave came, I had somehow managed to pay off the loans and saved some money for our use. We were slightly better off this time around, but it came at a cost. My son was forced to drop out of school, because I couldn't afford to pay the fees. And we were all living on one meal a day to ensure we had enough to fall back on in case the lockdown extended.

It was at this very difficult juncture of my life that I came across a support group of women in the community.

Over the last seven or eight months, the women, who all work as domestic workers in the high-rise societies near our community, became my friends and sisters. Together, we built the colony's first Resource and Support Center for and by women domestic workers. With them, I laughed, painted, sang, and built plans for a better future for ourselves. For the first time, I thought about starting my own business, and with these phenomenal women having my back, I don't think I will fail.

I had lost faith in people because of the struggles I faced in my past. But these women, my friends, taught me to hope and grow once again. I look forward to a brighter future, with them by my side.

“ From humble beginnings in Bangladesh to a community leader in Gurgaon: my story of change ”

— Taposhi



My name is Taposhi and I am a domestic worker living in Harijan Basti, a small colony in Gurgaon.

My family is originally from Bangladesh. My father was a businessman there, and that's where I was born and brought up. My father's work essentially was to catch and sell fish. We weren't extremely poor growing up, but we had a few financial problems.

For instance, I could not study beyond the sixth grade, even though I wanted to. I had to begin helping my father at his job instead. There was no one else in the family who could do it. I used to go with him to the market in the afternoons and return late at night, after selling the fish. This became my daily routine for the first few years of adolescence.

Then, when I completed sixteen years of age, my parents got me married. My husband's family was from India. They lived in a small village near the Hooghly river in Kolkata. We met through some common relatives. He was a decade or so older than me, but that's how things are in our community.

After our marriage, my husband and I lived with my parents in Bangladesh for a few years. Within the first year of my marriage, I became pregnant and had my son. I was just seventeen years old then. When he turned three years old, we decided to move to Delhi, in search of better opportunities.

Since then, I've never been back home.

## Moving to Delhi

Moving to Delhi was a very challenging and frightening experience for me. I was leaving behind my country and my village for the first time in my life. And I had no idea about the local language of Delhi, or anything at all about the city.

The language barrier became evident right from the time when our train pulled up in the station. I had no money and no phone at the time, so I had to request a stranger to lend me their phone to make a phone call to my brother. He was supposed to come and pick me and my husband up. We somehow managed to get our hands on the phone because my husband knew a few words in Hindi. But the experience made me very fearful about living in this new city.

For the first few years, we lived in Neem Chowk, a small colony near Lajpat Nagar market in Delhi. We lived with my brother, his family and a few other relatives. My sister-in-law helped me find work as a domestic worker in two households, just a few days after we'd moved.

One of the houses I worked in was a bungalow and the other a flat. The employers in the apartment were extremely kind and helpful, but working in the bungalow was tough. There, my employers took advantage of the fact that I didn't know the local language and made me do extra work for very little pay. I used to clean the entire three storey house and wash utensils twice a day for just Rs. 1500 a month.

The other employer, in contrast, paid me Rs. 5000 to do the same work in a much smaller house. She was a tuition teacher, and she helped me learn Hindi. I also learned how to cook in her house, a very important skill for me, as it helped me find better employment later. Because of her help, I haven't had to take up cleaning jobs in the last six or seven years. I take up cooking jobs now, which pay better and don't take a very heavy toll, physically.

While I was working in these two houses and picking up new skills, my husband found a job as a housekeeper in a temple nearby. Within a few months, he found a better opportunity in a guest house.

Things went on this way for a few years. Then, my father-in-law passed away, and we had to return to the village to help my mother-in-law. His village is close to Kolkata, near the Hooghly river. We lived there for three years, and lost our employment in the city.

## Building a Base in Gurgaon

After three years, my husband and I decided to move back to the city. This time, we picked Gurgaon. We'd heard there were many opportunities for work and growth here. My son, now a twenty-one year old, my husband and I have now been living here for about six years.

Things were getting along alright until the pandemic. At that time, my husband lost the job he had taken up as a housekeeper. Despite the setback, he turned it into an opportunity and started his own business. He now sells fish in the nearby localities from a small van.

The pandemic also had an impact on my work. I used to work in six households before COVID, but I lost my job in one. Now I work in five houses.

I have been associated with the Swabhiman Kendra (Resource Center in the community for and by women domestic workers) for six months now. I came across this community of amazing women nearly a year ago, and I immediately signed up to be a part of the group. I enjoy spending time with the women of the center, attending meetings and having a support group outside of my family.

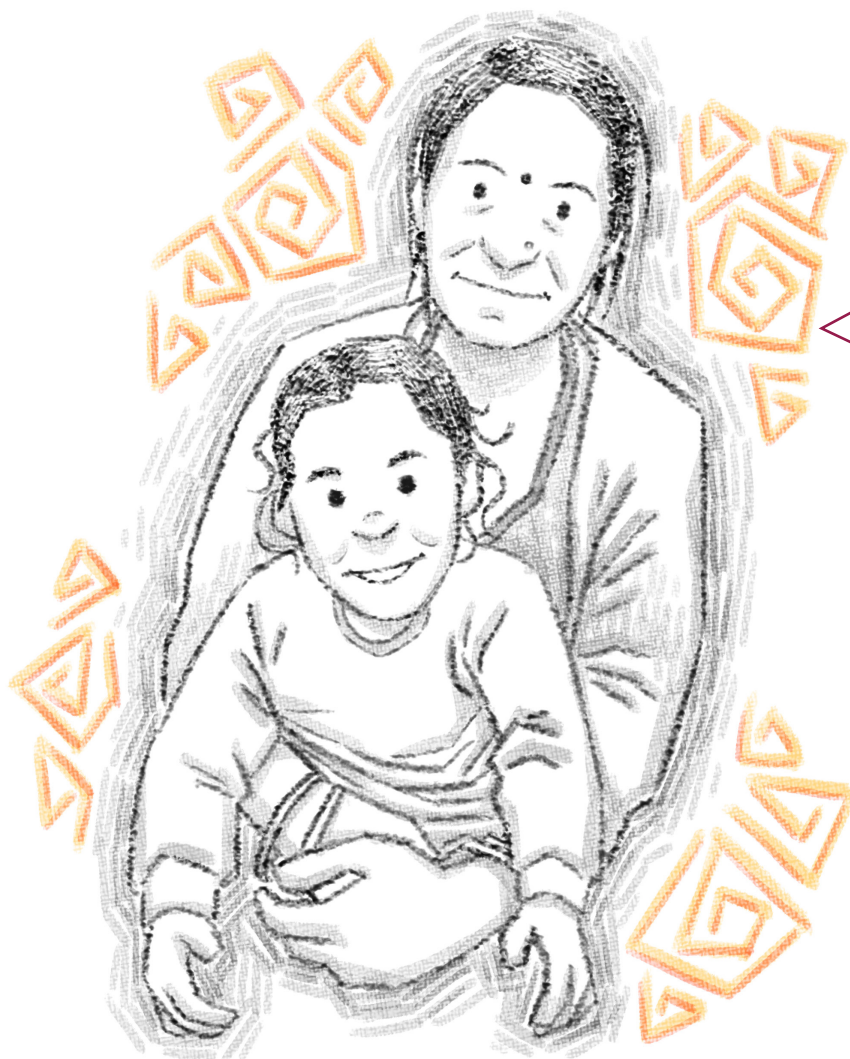
I have learned a lot from the women, and I have begun to explore my own aspirations through this association. One thing I want to do is return home to my mother's house. It's been nearly two decades since I was there last. The challenge is that my husband and I don't have passports to cross the border. I couldn't even go back when my father passed away, a few years ago. I'd like to be able to return someday soon.

Beyond that, I also have a vision for our group of women. I want us to grow, learn and earn together. I want us to have a name. Our work is honest and impactful, and everyone should know what we're capable of doing, as women leaders.



## “ How I Found My Identity and Confidence ”

*Bharti*



My name is Bharti and I am a resident of Harijan Basti, Gurgaon.

I belong to a large family. I have three sisters. We lived with my family in a small slum on the banks of a river in Old Delhi. I was not close to my parents, I feel I never really knew them.

I was just nine years old, when my older sister, who was a domestic worker in a bungalow in Mehrauli, South Delhi, took me away with her. I left with the few possessions I owned thinking that I would live and work with her.

But a day or two later, my sister's employers sent me to work at their relatives' house in Agra. They gave me two dresses and some undergarments to take with me and promised me that I would enjoy working in the house there.

I lived in Agra for three years, and my stay and work there were quite good I think compared to my life after that. My employer would only give me small things to do around the house. I never got into trouble if I couldn't do them. They instead insisted that I go to school, which was right below the house. They wanted me to study well. When I couldn't cope with schoolwork, they put me in tuitions.

In contrast, the schoolteachers were not kind to me. They would discriminate and humiliate me in front of everyone. They called me "duffer" when I didn't do well. Instead of teaching me they would make me fetch water and tea, and clean children who had soiled themselves. I was too scared to tell my employers.

## A Childhood Spent Working

After three years I was abruptly forced to return to Delhi. My sister had left her job for new work in a foreign country. Her employers asked me to come back to take her place.

I was sad to leave my employers. They helped me pack my belongings. I remember them putting my books in my bag and them telling me not to stop my studies.

But life in Delhi was nothing like Agra. I never studied again.

From the moment I set foot in the house in Mehrauli, my new employers put me to work. I didn't know where things were and how to work the way they wanted me to. There was no one to help me, I was so lost and so scared. They scolded me often. They would shout at me for every mistake I made. I got used to being told "This girl knows nothing" and "Yeh toh kabhi nahi sudhregi, ganwaar ki ganwaar rahegi (This girl will never change, she's illiterate and will remain illiterate)."

I was only 11 years old.

They asked me to keep my clothes far away in a store cupboard because they felt that me and my clothes smelled bad. I never understood why, as they were the ones who bought my clothes, soap and my detergent.

Eventually, they moved into an apartment.

Things got worse. They beat me often if I made a mistake. Not just in the house, they beat me anywhere - in shops, on the streets, in the condominium. They would suspect me of flirting with boys resulting in more beatings. When I cried, they thought I was being oversensitive. I had become used to being called "naukrani (servant)", "idiot" and "duffer".

I hated my life. I was so lonely. Their children and those in the condominium never included me in their games. I also remember being extremely hungry all the time. I had a healthy appetite and my former employers had made sure that I ate well. In this house, my food was rationed. I would eat leftover food after everyone in the house had eaten.

A few months after living like that, I began to steal food - a few biscuits here and there, or if there were rotis left over after dinner. I never got caught, but I would feel very scared, and was forced to eat the food late at night, after everyone had gone to sleep.

A few years later, my employers built a house of their own in Gurgaon and we moved. For the first time, I had a room and a cupboard of my own. But if something went missing in the house my cupboard was the first to be

searched.

I was so scared when I began menstruating. I didn't know what was happening to me. I was scared to tell anyone. I used an old cloth for the initial few months. I hid my pain when I had cramps and continued to do hard physical labour through the pain. When my employer found out a few months later, she scolded me for having entered the kitchen and cooking during my periods, and for having used the cloth without permission.

But I continued to live with them. I had no other place to go.

## Finding Love

I met my husband a few years later. My employers had relatives living in Old Delhi. The two families would visit each other often and I would accompany.

My husband worked for the relatives. We got along well. We began looking for opportunities to speak with each other. We would often call each other in secret.

When my employers eventually found out, I was beaten, and my husband was threatened with police action. But we were adamant, and eventually they relented and allowed us to get married.

## Finding My Identity

After our wedding, we lived in a small settlement in Gurgaon for six months. I found a job in the housekeeping department of a school.

Things were fine for a few months. Then, the bus driver of the school bus began passing sexual comments at me. I almost quit my job over it, but I decided to tell the school principal, who took action and dismissed the driver.

Eventually, I had to leave my job when we moved to Harijan Basti. But the school job had given me a sense of purpose and identity that made me very proud of myself, for the first time in my life.

After moving to the Basti, I became pregnant and had my daughter. With the help of a local NGO, I was able to have a very comfortable pregnancy - all the facilities were made available to me in the government hospital. My husband's employers were doctors, and they would give us second opinions, without charging us.

After I had my child, I met Sarita, and together, all of us moved together to our current home in Harijan Basti. She is my neighbour and close friend. I also found out that she was a community leader, working with Martha Farrell Foundation.

Through her, I began to interact with other women in the Basti, and over the last year, I've become very close with them.

Speaking to the women domestic workers here, exchanging ideas and thoughts with them, made me realise for the first time that I had done nothing wrong at my employers' home. The interactions in the Resource Center have changed me significantly. I began working again – I work as a

domestic worker in an apartment close by. Today I am confident and strong, I am proud of my identity as a working woman and a mother. I just wish I had been a part of this community sooner. Today, I am resolved to make my daughter a strong and independent person who will never hesitate to stand up for her rights and compromise on her aspirations.

## “ After Years of Struggle, How I Found My Purpose with a Tribe of Inspiring Women ”

Sonia

My name is Sonia and I live with my husband and daughter in Gurgaon's Harijan Basti, a small colony amidst high rise apartments. I was just sixteen years old when I migrated to this city with my parents. It's been fourteen years since.

My family originally belonged to Murshidabad, a village located about five hours away by road from Kolkata, West Bengal. We migrated to the city to escape the violence there. It used to be very scary.

Criminal groups in the village would come into our community and randomly enter houses to beat people up. They would misbehave with the women there. My uncle and maternal grandfather were both attacked by them. My grandfather was old and couldn't even walk when he was attacked. They beat him up and pushed him, and he fell. Frightened, and wanting to protect me and my siblings, my mother brought us to the city. Her relatives used to live in Gurgaon back then, and they recommended the city and its many opportunities to us.

Back in the village, I used to go to school. I studied till the seventh grade there. My father's shop used to fetch us a decent income. We weren't very wealthy, but we were comfortable and happy. We even had pets - a fish, a parrot and a rabbit! He had named his shop after me, as I was his only daughter and he loved me dearly.

I remember back then, we used to have enough money to hire a domestic worker. I didn't have to do any of the household work, because my parents wanted me to study and play like other children. My father would bring me gifts when he returned from work. Things used to be very peaceful.

But when we were moving, there was a huge land dispute in the family. One of my grand aunts had claimed a plot of land that belonged to my mother. To save the land, my mother had to sell everything she owned, including her jewellery and our shop. A lot of that money went into bribing the police to help see our case through quickly.





## My First Job

Once we came to the city, my parents had to start from scratch. We didn't even have enough money to let me continue my schooling. We were in a very difficult financial situation when we arrived.

Back then, the city of Gurgaon hadn't developed enough like it has today. There were no colonies or buildings. When we moved, it was just forest land, and this colony used to be an informal jhuggi (slum) settlement. I was sixteen years old then, and it was very unsafe for me to be alone in the house. I couldn't go out alone, even to work, and as my mother was working through the day, it was not possible for her to be with me all the time.

To keep me safe and to add to the family income, she got me a job in a house as a domestic worker. I used to work 12 hours a day, and she would drop me to my workplace early in the morning at 7 am and pick me up at 7 pm.

The initial working days were very, very difficult for me. My employers weren't compassionate. They would not let me rest or eat during the day. At every moment of the day, they made sure I was working. I couldn't speak to anyone. They were also very nitpicky - they would constantly check my work and make me repeat my tasks to fill my day with work.

I used to find domestic work very difficult and constantly cried in the house. My legs would ache because I wasn't allowed to sit even for a moment. I had never worked before this, and I wasn't used to the constant toil.

But this was my life, and I forced myself to get used to it, eventually.

## A Difficult Love Marriage

It was about one year after I had found employment in the house that I got married. It was a love marriage.

My family belongs to the Muslim faith, and my husband is a Hindu. He lived in a colony near ours. After an initial couple of run-ins in the colony, it became regular practice for him to walk me to and back from work. He would constantly be by my side. That's how we fell in love.

We knew our families would oppose our marriage, so we went to the court and got married quietly. When my mother found out, she was very angry. She scolded me, slapped me and even threatened to take me back to the village. She said, "I have only one daughter and she ended up like this! We shouldn't stay here anymore."

My elder brother beat me up for marrying a boy from a different faith. He beat me so much, my hand broke. My father was the only one who didn't say anything - he hasn't said anything to date, in fact.

The night I returned after my wedding, my mother and elder brother locked me in my room and refused to let me out. The landlord rescued me.

After that, for a year or more, my family didn't speak to me at all. I was sixteen then, and I thought I had done the right thing. But today, when I look back, I regret that my family and I fell apart.

After marriage, my husband changed. He began drinking, and he beat me. He wouldn't come home for many nights in a row, he would throw me out of the house whenever he felt like. I have spent so many nights outside the house with nowhere to go. I had no option but to continue living with him, because my parents had stopped speaking to me. After throwing me out, he would sometimes call me back to the house, and beat me more. The cycle of violence never really stopped.

I became pregnant with my first child and things got even more difficult. There was no one to take care of me, no one to help me. I often used to go hungry.

Then, my mother heard what had happened, and she finally reconciled with me. She tried to reason with my husband, but he would fight her too. She was forced to give me food and clothes in secret at the time.

My husband's family doesn't acknowledge mine. After my marriage I was asked to change my name. My name is actually Shehnaaz, but I had to convert my name to Sonia. All my documents were updated. In fact, no one in my husband's village has a clue that I'm Muslim. I didn't want to change my identity, but my in-laws told me, "Now that you've got married, you must do this."

Although we are on speaking terms, I really don't think they have truly accepted me, even today. My children lived with them for a while, and they would constantly tell me how my community and my religion have spoiled my children.

They belong to a very orthodox community in Palwal, Haryana, and what they wanted more than anything was for me and my children to go live with them and become just like them. They wanted me to work on their farm. But I didn't know how to farm, so how could I?

I choose to continue my marriage for my children. I have no money or savings of my own, because my husband keeps all my money. I don't want them to be left with nothing. I actually never wanted a second child, but I became pregnant. My husband refused to give me money for birth control surgery. I love my children very dearly though, and it is for them that I do everything I do.

## Working for my Family

After marriage, I didn't stop working as a domestic worker. Instead, I decided to try and earn more money, especially after I had my children. My elder child was living with my in-laws then, but I wanted to ensure they would never say anything to him (in case I didn't send money to them on time).

To earn more, I decided to learn new skills and improve my employability. I learned stitching and the basics of being a beautician.

My in-laws never approved of my work as a domestic worker. They feel it is beneath them to have their daughter in law work in other people's houses. But my question is, why don't they feel bad asking me to work on their farmland? Or anywhere at all, for that matter?

After I learned beautician work, I began to work part time in a salon for women, which fetched more money than domestic work. It's my aspiration to do a professional course so my income increases further.

My husband keeps threatening to send my daughter to live with his parents but I won't let him. I also won't let him get her married before she's old enough to. I know the legal age for marriage of girls has been pushed up, but that doesn't mean anything in the village. I recently went there for a few days and I heard that two sisters, aged 14 and 15, who were my aunt's daughters, were being married off by their families. I don't want my daughter to get married like that! I'm determined to ensure that she studies. That's why I work, for my two children.

I have worked a lot in my life, but I've never seen a decent amount of money in my hands, in one bunch. My husband takes it all. In fact, I wanted to open a bank account and put aside money for my daughter so she could benefit from the government's Sukanya Yojana. But my husband refuses to give me the money for it. He says, "If our daughter gets that money when she's older, she will refuse to get married!"

That's really how it is at home. In fourteen years of marriage, I've only been allowed to visit my maternal home twice, once for a wedding and once for a funeral. Both times, my husband fought with me bitterly.

I really regret marrying my husband when I was that young. I've had to change everything after my marriage - my name, my diet, what I eat and how I sit. I used to love eating meat, but now I'm afraid to even do it in secret. If my husband's family finds out, there'll be trouble. As a Bengali, I love rice, but we've switched to rotis because that's my husband's preference. When I want rice, I take it from my mother in secret.

## Fighting My Fears, Finding Myself

I met Sarita, a domestic worker living in the same colony, during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. She was distributing rations with the support of the Martha Farrell Foundation and PRIA. I began talking to her then, and I told her about my life and the challenges I was facing.

Through her, I became associated with the Swabhimaan (Community Resource Center) a few months ago. In this short time, I have seen a lot of changes in me. I have learned a lot during the sessions and have received immense support from the members of the group.

After a very long time, I feel motivated to start something of my own, looking at the women around me. I want to make a new identity for myself, and this group has brought me a step closer to that dream. We are more like a family than anything, we support each other and listen to each other. It's been wonderful to find myself again, albeit slowly, among these amazing and inspiring women - my friends. With them, I'm looking forward to a brighter future!

## Women of Harijan Basti: Finding themselves

सब्र सागर सा बना लिया हैं, पर चुनोतिया रूकती कहाँ है,  
जो जकड़े है मेरे सपनों को, वो बंधन टूटती कहाँ है।  
अपने शहर को छोड़, इस शहर आई पर वो उम्मीदें अब दिखती कहाँ है।  
डर, मजबूरी, असुरक्षा की दीवार गिरती कहाँ है?

बन्द खिड़कियाँ हमने खोल दिये है,  
खुद पे भरोसा न होने जैसा कुछ, हमने पीछे छोड़ दिया है,  
नए रास्तों की ओर रुख मोड़ लिया है,  
हमने आपस में एक दूसरे को जोड़ लिया है  
नए सपने, नए किस्से, बेहतर भविष्य की तरफ बढ़ रहे हम,  
एक नई पहचान की सीढ़ी चढ़ रहे है हम।

My patience was like the ocean – wide and deep, yet  
my challenges never ceased

The chains that constrained my ability to dream did not break  
I left my home, my city in search of a better life, but my hopes faded fast  
And the walls of fear, vulnerability and insecurity did not fall

I have now opened the windows that were earlier closed  
I have learned to trust myself again

We are turning our lives around, we are forging new paths  
We are bound to each other as companions in this journey  
Creating new dreams, new stories, better futures  
We are achieving new heights and identities

Written by Samiksha Jha, Program Officer and translated by Nandita Bhatt,  
Director- operations, Martha Farrell Foundation dedicated to the women of  
Harijan Basti.

Each woman in this anthology has had to deal with more challenges in their  
lifetime than is fair. Their stories reflect the lived realities of the women of  
Harijan Basti, Gurgaon. We thank them for their stories and their contribu-  
tion for the anthology.

During the Second Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic in India, domestic workers  
of Harijan Basti, spearheaded a relief operation with Martha Farrell Foundation.  
They made door to door house visits, identified the neediest among them and  
provided essential relief to over 750 families of domestic workers. They also  
played an important role in communicating positive and accurate messaging for  
vaccinations and COVID-safe behavior.

Swabhimaan ('Self Esteem'), the Resource and Support Center was set up in  
Harijan Basti, Gurgaon. During this period with the Support of Netherlands  
Embassy and Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF), the center has brought together  
informal women workers of the Basti in a bond strengthened by their shared  
experiences. They find joy in their wins and each other's successes; they laugh  
and sing. And support each other on an incredible journey of self-discovery,  
individual change, and collective leadership.

Together, they run Swabhimaan, the only such first women friendly safe space  
in the city. This year they have organised and led several learning sessions with  
the community, with national and international academics, policymakers and  
civil society leaders on women and survivor centered approaches to develop-  
ment. They have also led the first participatory safety mapping exercise of  
Phase 5, Gurgaon.

Here, they are not afraid. They have the courage to dream and articulate their  
aspirations. Confident women, with their past at rest, now look to the future  
with excitement, in solidarity. There are only possibilities now.

This is the incredible journey of 10 women, strong, bold and invisible no more.





