

# Challenges faced by women domestic workers during the second wave of the Pandemic: An Overview



Millions of domestic workers in India, mostly women and migrants, form one of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups of workers in the country. According to an analysis in 2014 by Women In Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising, the lack of recognition as 'workers' and vague 'employer-employee' definitions impedes their ability to access the social security rights guaranteed under the Labor laws (now subsumed under the four Labour Codes).

This, despite the fact that at the national level, domestic workers have been included under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Aarogya Yojana (PMJAY), the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act (SHW Act, 2013), and the Unorganised Sector Social Security Act. To date, improper implementation results in domestic workers' lack of access to assured benefits.

With little regulation around the terms and conditions of their employment, domestic workers are consequently forced to battle economic, social, physical and psychological harassment, in the hands of the system, their employers, and law keepers. Their precarious work conditions leave them with little to no bargaining power in the workplace, leaving them vulnerable to workplace harassment and sexual harassment. Low income status and skewed gender equations also makes them vulnerable to domestic violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this. Domestic workers' invisible status as workers and citizens became more pronounced in their lack of recognition as essential workers in the pandemic. In the first wave, the women domestic workers that the Martha Farrell Foundation and PRIA worked with spoke of being labelled as 'Corona Carriers'. The Foundation and PRIA's co-published anthology of accounts by women domestic workers during the first wave in 2020 revealed domestic workers in Gurgaon were struggling to deal with lack of space for physical distancing, loss of jobs and income, increasing risk of violence in their homes, inability to pay rent, and severe emotional duress.

When the first lockdown ended, there was barely any change. Women domestic workers returned to work, many at lower wages than before, stripped of the little bargaining power they had. Many were also struggling to clear debts accumulated during the lockdown. Employers insisted on testing, which was a challenge in terms of accessibility as well as affordability.

During the second wave (between May - July), a study conducted by Martha Farrell Foundation along with 4463 domestic workers found:

- Out of 4463 women surveyed, over 3424 had lost their employment, against 1039 who were working.
- With little to no savings and dwindling incomes, domestic workers across the board had begun borrowing money for rations
- Without income, domestic workers began to find it very difficult to pay their rent, electricity and water bills. Domestic workers faced harassment and sexual harassment from landlords because of their inability to pay their bills.
- Despite the Government's response to reach out to informal and migrant workers, domestic workers were unable to access Government benefits and schemes. Very few domestic workers had Jan Dhan accounts, widows weren't accessing benefits under the Widow Pension Scheme and very few families accessed benefits under Ayushman Bharat Yojana.
- Impacts were also felt on domestic workers' children. The dropout rate in schools increased. Children were at risk of malnutrition, as essential foods became unavailable.
- Majority of the families used shared toilets and community toilets which were unclean, did not have constant supply of water and non-conducive to physical distancing and following COVID protocols
- Pregnancies were extremely challenging to manage.
   Menstrual hygiene products were only sparsely available.
- Domestic workers and their families faced severe mental health consequences, but were unable to give their mental health any priority



# **Introduction to the Project**

The 'Community support centers for and by Women Domestic Workers: Building resilience and hope beyond the pandemic' project is an initiative of PRIA, supported by the Embassy of The Netherlands in India.

The project supported the setting up of and running of two Community Support Centres (Swabhiman Kendras) for women domestic workers and their daughters in Gurgaon and Panipat, Haryana. It has been implemented in collaboration with Martha Farrell Foundation, who is a knowledge partner in this project.

The Community Support Centres (Swabhiman Kendra) are envisioned as a safe space and a common point for women to coalesce, learn, collectivize and support each other. Sawabhiman Kendras will be run by the women domestic workers, who have been trained on various services that the Community Support Center will provide.



# Objectives of the Project (Swabhiman Kendra)

The aim of this project is to set up a community support center for women domestic workers and their daughters in Gurugram and Panipat, Haryana. The project worked towards facilitating the needs of domestic workers through the following objectives:

- To provide a safe learning space to women domestic workers to mitigate exacerbated challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic faced by them and their families.
- To provide Access to information about health related services to minimize the challenges faced during the pandemic
- To provide access to entitlements and services as citizens, workers and women.
- Building linkages of women domestic workers with governance systems for protection and redressal of sexual harassment at work and domestic violence
- Building capacities of women domestic workers with skills and knowledge to build leadership for establishing a sustainable Self-Help Group.

# **Project locations**

1. Bichpadi village in Panipat, a small clustered village located on the outskirts of Panipat's posh residential area. The village is inhabited largely by the locals of Haryana, the women of the households work as domestic workers in the nearby settlements. Majority of the women workers are natives of the village whereas, 20% are migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.





2. Harijan Basti in Gurgaon, a clustered settlement in the heart of Gurgaon's posh Sector 42. The colony is inhabited largely by women domestic workers who work in the high rise apartments nearby, and their families. Majority of domestic workers are migrants from neighboring and far off states in North India.







# **Qualitative Project Impacts**

- In a first, women domestic workers in Gurgaon and Panipat own and lead a physical safe space, which has been named "Swabhiman Kendra" or a "centre where I build my self respect"
- In Women domestic workers of Gurgaon and Panipat came together as a collective and supported each other through the most difficult times.
- Swabhiman Kendra's have become vibrant learning spaces: lessons on Financial literacy and entrepreneurship have helped women to begin saving and plan their finances. Sessions on gender and gender based violence have helped women recognise signs of violence and learn ways of addressing them.
- Women have taken ownership of the centres and are now organising and holding meetings and conversations on their own. The center has facilitated heartfelt conversation among women and their daughters about their dreams and aspirations.

- The Swabhiman kendra has become an information hub. Both the Kendras supported women domestic workers and their daughters in accessing government services such as opening bank accounts under Pradham Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna, registration to e-shram portal as workers and citizens.
- Women domestic workers in Gurgaon formed a Self- Help group where they have begun giving loans to the group members on the basis of needs.
- Women domestic workers in Panipat have begun to make a monthly budget and saving in their personal bank accounts.
- Women domestic workers have begun opening up about their lives, aspirations for alternative livelihood.
- Women domestic workers are more aware and understand their choices in all spheres of life.
- More women domestic workers in Gurgaon and Panipat have begun taking leadership roles and initiative. They help in mobilizing other women and organizing meetings and celebrations in the Swabhiman kendra.
- Women domestic workers and their daughters celebrate important days and festivals in the Kendra. They plan and organize the celebration on their own. They celebrated Diwali, Christmas, New year eve and Republic Day in the center where they cooked, decorated, danced and sang together.

## **Project Highlights**

The project began in July 2021 for a period of eight months. Women domestic workers and their daughters who were part of the project undertook a journey of learning and empowerment through the Community Support Center. Some of the key activities conducted with and by women domestic workers and their daughters are mentioned below:

#### **Participatory Orientation workshop**

On 1st August, 2021, women domestic workers and field facilitators from Harijan Basti, Gurugram and Bichpadi village, Panipat were oriented on critical aspects of the project, at the PRIA Head Office in Delhi. Participants underwent Participatory capacity building training on the purpose of setting up the community support center, data collection for collectivisation and needs verification using a mobile-based survey methodology. They were introduced to Research ethics, such as taking consent before clicking pictures, and the importance of keeping their prejudices behind them while speaking to a community member, refraining from making any personal comments or remarks and not imposing own political viewpoints during the conversation were also emphasized.

#### Informal communications and Home visits in Panipat

Bichpadi village in Panipat is the new identified location hence intensive trust building with the community members was required. To build rapport with the women domestic workers and for sharing the purpose of establishing the community support centre, the administrative head of the village was approached. The village head helped to build some initial linkages and also suggested using the public Chaupal (public building) to make the community support centre. Through initial conversations held with a group of women domestic workers from the community and several home visits, the demographic profile and the felt need of the community was known. The initial conversation paved the path for the needs verification survey in the Bichpadi village, Panipat.

Contrary to this, In Gurugram a strong trust has already been established through past projects.







#### Setting up of women led Swabhiman Kendra

The community support centre in Panipat was established by women domestic workers from the community and field facilitators. Under the supervision of a few domestic workers, the village chaupal (village building) was cleaned and painted. Previously, the Chaupal area was a place for men to sit, play cards, and smoke hookah, but women soon declared the area a community support centre primarily for women domestic workers and their daughters. The declaration was not made on a single day; women had planned and held several rounds of meetings with the village head (Sarpanch) to reach the final decision.

Women used to meet at one of the domestic worker's terraces in Gurgaon, so they decided to locate the Center closer to that location. After deciding on a location, the women domestic workers negotiated the rent and the terms of the lease. They called the meeting to discuss the community support center's logistics and facilities. After two meetings, they developed a list of essential requirements for the centre in order for it to be a safe, inclusive, and comfortable space for everyone.

Domestic workers who knew how to sew made curtains for the door and windows. They cleaned the area and kept an eye on the white washing process. They also placed sanitary napkins and posters about nutrition and menstruation in the centre for women/girls to use.

#### Needs Assessment Survey in Bichpadi village, Panipat

Following participatory research principles, field facilitator and animator undertook a Needs Assessment Survey in August , 2021 to map informal women workers' existing skill sets and aspirations for growth and change. Women also planned the Community Support Centre's services and activities (Swabhiman Kendra). This assessment of women workers' felt needs and current status, co-created by domestic workers through a visualisation session, resulted in the only such community-led, trauma-informed report on the challenges faced by informal migrant women workers in Bichpadi village. Women workers shared concerns of the lack of dignity in their work, particularly in the eyes of their employers. Concerns about personal safety, job insecurity, and a lack of access to health services and government benefits were among the key challenges they identified; the same issues were raised in a needs assessment survey conducted with Gurgaon's domestic workers in January 2021.

#### **Visioning exercises**

Women domestic workers from Panipat participated in two visioning exercises in August and September, 2021. Drawing from their own experiences, women spoke about the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic had on their lives. Hunger, loss of livelihood and mounting bills were key challenges. They expressed a need for forming a women 's collective that could support them economically and emotionally at the time of crisis and distress. They also expressed the need of learning micro financing and entrepreneurship.

In Gurgaon, women domestic workers facilitated two visioning exercises in the month of September, 2021. On the basis of their recent experience of the second wave of the Pandemic they highlighted and discussed their biggest concerns - hunger and the scarcity of food at the time was a very big concern. The women rallied together and led one of the biggest relief drives led by, with and for domestic workers.

#### **Focus Group Discussions**

The activities of the Community support centre (Swabhiman Kendra) were carefully designed by the women domestic workers themselves during Focus Group Discussions. The centre served as a safe space for collective deliberation, sharing, learning and action. The group meetings also proved out to be excellent spaces for women to relax and unwind and bond. In both the areas, regular focused group discussions on Gender, gender based violence, Rights and dignity, self, health and nutrition were conducted with and by women domestic workers and their daughters.



#### Conversation of hopes and dreams: International Girl child day Celebration

Most of the women do not get time to interact with their daughters due to their busy schedules. On International Girl Child Day, women domestic workers and their daughters spent the afternoon having heartfelt conversations with each other about their dreams and aspirations. They spent an emotional afternoon painting and drawing together their dreams, ambitions and aspirations, renewing bonds and silently pledging to support each other.



#### Inauguration event of Swabhiman Kendra, Panipat

The Swabhiman Kendra in Panipat was formally inaugurated on 27th October, 2021 with 90 women domestic workers and 18 adolescent girls. The District Protection officer and SHO of the Women Police station attended the event and shared information on the legal recourse available for redressal of GBV. They promised their support if they were approached by the women at any time.



#### **Participatory Learning Sessions with women domestic workers**

Participatory Learning Sessions on understanding sex and gender, socialisation and patriarchy, and gender-based violence were conducted. The sessions were particularly pertinent to domestic workers, as sexual harassment in the personal, professional, and public spheres are everyday realities for them. The sessions were catalysts in enabling women to identify and grasp the intersectional nature of the issue of gender and sexual violence, and be able to discuss and report such issues without fear or shame.

#### Participatory analysis of the workload of women domestic workers

The women associated with the center wanted to form a collective or start their own alternative business but due to the heavy workload of house and work they were unable to start anything. A participatory art based session was conducted at the Swabhimaan Kendra, Panipat with the objective of highlighting and analyzing the workload analysis of the women domestic workers and their partners and family members. Challenges of gender role expectations were deliberated upon in great detail. Few women went back after the session and negotiated with their husbands about taking some responsibilities in doing household responsibilities so that they could spend time in upskilling themselves.





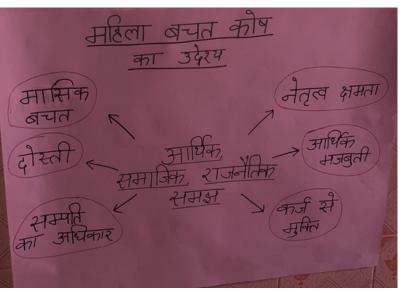


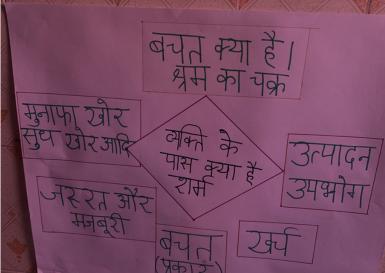
**Project Report, 2022** 

#### **Capacity building Workshop on Financial literacy and entrepreneurship**

In December, Swabhiman kendra (Gurgaon and Panipat) organized a series of workshops on financial literacy and entrepreneurship. The main goal of the workshop was to promote financial literacy among domestic workers, educate them about their rights and options so that they can be informed and self-sufficient, and provide them with information about entrepreneurship. 75 women domestic workers, 12 young self-employed women, and 15 adolescent girls from both locations attended the workshop. The sessions were divided into the following four sessions:

- Basics of financial literacy (Credit, savings, budget)
- Financial well-being (financial security, freedom of choice)
- Basics of entrepreneurship
- Business model canvas





#### **Workshop on menstrual wellness**

During the 16 days of Activism, a session has been conducted with women domestic workers and their adolescent daughters associated with the Swabhimaan Kendra in Panipat and Gurgaon. A session on nutrition, health and wellness, and debunking myths around menstrual wellness and hygiene, as key steps towards countering gender-based discrimination and violence was conducted in both Panipat and Gurgaon. Once again, this was a mother - daughter event.

#### Participatory learning session with the adolescent girls

Participatory learning sessions on self, communication, life goals, gender and gender based violence were conducted with adolescent girls in both the locations. The Swabhiman kendra is a friendly space for adolescent girls, they come to the centre on their own after school to learn and also to spend some quiet time doing homework and other things.

#### Webinar on safety and technology with Nasscom Foundation

More than 135 women domestic workers from Gurgaon and Panipat attended a webinar on 'Discourse on safety and technology for women domestic workers' organized in collaboration with Nasscom Foundation. Some women domestic workers joined through their mobile phones while majority of the women joined from the Swabhiman kendras in both the locations. Through the webinar participants were introduced with the My Amber mobile-based application developed for safety and empowerment of women in India. Participants were given a thorough run of the app and were demonstrated various features of the application like audio features to listen to the information. The application has easy access to important helpline numbers and service providers related to Gender based violence. The app also includes a risk management tool to understand physical and emotional state with recommendations for further course of action. Participants were introduced with the SOS helpline button, an extensive service directory to reach out to legal and counseling services.

#### Opening of bank accounts under Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna

It was discovered that only a few women in both places had their own bank accounts, and many were survivors of economic violence. Officials from the local Bank were invited to the centre to support women in opening their Jan Dhan accounts. 80 Jan Dhan accounts of women domestic workers were opened during the camp in Panipat. An additional 22 women went physically to the Bank and opened their own accounts.



#### Registration to e-shram portal

The e-Sharm portal was launched by the Ministry of labor and employment under the government of India to form a database of workers from the unorganized sector on 26th August 2021. Domestic workers are one of the most marginalized workers from unorganized sector because The Code on Social Security 2020 introduced by the central government has also excluded them and as a result, they remain completely outside the purview of government welfare schemes. Launching of the eshram portal has certainly created a ray of hope for at least treating them as workers.

- Since in Panipat, most of the women domestic workers were residents of the state, linking them to the e-shram portal was comparatively easier. A total of 190 women domestic workers were supported to register themselves under the e-shram portal from Bichpadi village, Panipat.
- In Gurugram, majority of the domestic workers are migrants from states like Bihar, west Bengal, Uttar pradesh etc. hence linking them to the e-shram portal was difficult. In majority of the cases, the adhaar card of the domestic workers were not updated and linked to their mobile number. Domestic worker leaders in the community formed a group and decided to visit the nearby adhaar seva kendra. They wrote an application to the concerned officer for organizing a aadhaar camp in the basti so that every women domestic worker could update their adhaar card and accordingly make their e-shram cards. A total of 50 women domestic workers were supported to register themselves through the centre in Gurgaon.



#### Vaccination drive at Swabhiman Kendra, Panipat

Considering the urgency of Covid-19 vaccination and women domestic workers' doubts and questions related to the vaccine; awareness and sensitization workshop was organized in the Kendra. Between September and December, 75 women domestic workers were supported by the centre to receive their vaccines. Additionally, 42 adolescent girls and boys were also sensitized and taken to the nearby vaccination camp organized in one of the government schools in the month of January.

#### Understanding sexual harassment at workplace

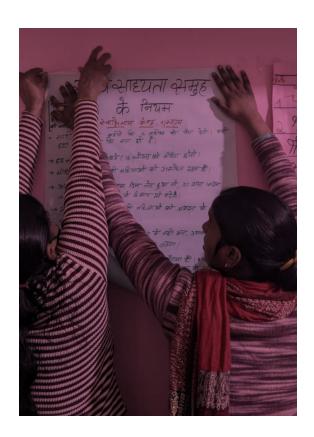
Conversations about sexual harassment at workplace are difficult to hold among women in India because of the stigma, shame and cultural silence that shrouds the issue. Among women domestic workers, who live in precarious economic and social conditions, with little bargaining power with their employers, the issue is even more silenced. A participatory session was organized with 40 women domestic workers in Panipat, Haryana. The session envisioned to sensitize women domestic workers on the issue of sexual harassment at workplace and encourage them to open up about their experiences through an art-based group activity. 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.

# Self- Help Group: A way towards collectivism and sisterhood

Women domestic workers in Harijan Basti, Gurugram, took the initiative to form a self-help group to support one another financially and emotionally. They decided to form their own collective after attending a financial literacy and entrepreneurship workshop.

They compiled a list of 30 women domestic workers who are interested in joining the group. They decided as a group to collect/submit a set amount of money each month. The money will be used to give loans to the women in the group who require them the most.

The self-help group has already begun to support and respect one another's choices. This is the first self-help group to be formed in the Basti; the group supports women in talking about their problems, seeking help, and providing support.



# **Snapshot: Project Numbers**

Event/category	Numbers
Outreach to women domestic workers	750
Needs assessment survey conducted with women domestic workers in Panipat	96
Number of orientation program conducted	1
Number of Focused group discussions with women domestic worker conducted	6
Number of Focused group discussions with adolescent girls conducted	3
Number of visioning exercise conducted	4
Mother- daughter interaction (International Girl child day)	2
Community support center Inauguration event	1
Capacity building workshop on financial literacy and entrepreneurship	8
Listening and learning circle held for and by Women domestic workers and their daughters	2
Participatory learning training sessions with women domestic workers	10
Participatory learning training sessions with adolescent girls Informal meetings and home visits	12
Opening of bank accounts under PMJDY	102
Registration under e-shram portal of women domestic workers	240
Women domestic workers and adolescent vaccinated through Community support center	119
Number of women self-help group formed	1
Impact assessment - sharing of Journey workshop conducted	1

# **Key learnings**



The importance of a safe physical space for women to come together was highlighted in the project. With the help of accessible and safe physical spaces that were created through the project, women and young girls are able to collectivize, reclaim their voice and agency.



Women domestic workers have aspirations and dreams for building better futures for themselves, but due to societal norms and underlying pressure they are not able to achieve it. The meaning of agency and empowerment has a different meaning for every woman and the pace of recognising it is an ongoing process.



Economic empowerment is linked with the women and girls' potential to make decisions in their lives. However, it is not solely the factor but it certainly enables other factors like decision making and having choices; it also influences power dynamics and societal structure.



The process of transformation of, with and by women domestic workers and their daughters is a long term, constant and ongoing process. With women domestic workers and their daughters as primary stakeholders in the project, however, continuing and sustained efforts in the community has been ensured.



Domestic workers do not want their children, particularly their daughters, to work as domestic workers. They desire improved education for their children, as well as friendly neighborhoods, appropriate sanitation, and safety. The Pandemic has had a significant impact on their children's education; many have dropped out, and many cannot afford an online education system. The quality of education has always been the issue and during the Pandemic it has further exacerbated.



Women domestic workers want their daughters to be confident and self-reliant. They don't want them to be trapped in a vicious cycle of violence and poverty. They want their daughters to be aware about their rights from a very early age, they want their daughters to be financially independent and sound.

## **Reports and Learning materials**

#### **Links to Reports and Project Updates**

- 1. Informal Discussion with Women Informal Workers https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-214
- 2. Participatory Training workshop https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-219
- 3. Initiating the Participatory Needs Assessment Survey https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-215
- 4. Visioning exercise with women domestic workers in Panipat https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-216
- 5. A process of going together Swabhimaan kendra in Gurugram https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-223
- 6. E- shram cards registration at Swabhiman Kendra, Gurugram https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-256
- 7. Setting Up the Swabhiman Kendra (Community Support Centre) in Panipat https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-221
- 8. Vaccination Drive https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-220
- 9. A conversation of understanding and hope https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-232
- 10. Busting Myths Around Menstruation with Adolescents in Panipat: A conversation with daughters of domestic workers https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-262
- 11. Virtual session for women domestic workers on discourse of safety and technology https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-264
- 12. Participatory learning session on Menstrual wellness with women domestic workers in Gurugram https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-263
- 13. Inauguration event of Swabhiman Kendra, Panipat https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-252
- 14. Self- Help Group: A way towards collectivism and sisterhood https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-267
- 15. Understanding sexual harassment at workplace with Women domestic workers of Panipat, Haryana https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-266

- 16. Listening circle: A process strengthening the solidarity https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-265
- 17. A step closure to economic empowerment: Women domestic workers opened their Bank accounts

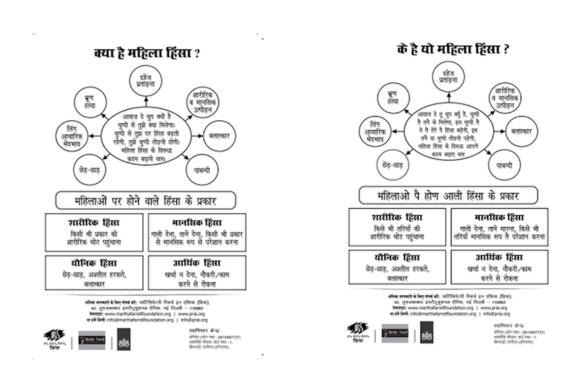
https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-261

- 18. A session on Mapping life goals through art with adolescent girls of Panipat https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-260
- 19. Capacity building Workshop on Financial literacy and entrepreneurship in Panipat https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-257
- 20. A participatory analysis of the workload of women domestic workers https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-253
- 21. Registration as workers through e-shram portal https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-259
- 22. Building Capacity of women domestic workers on financial literacy and entrepreneurship in Gurgaon https://www.pria.org/update-swabhimaan-kendra-community-support-centre-30-258
- 23. Needs assessment report,
  Panipat
  https://www.pria.org/knowledge\_resource/1644825518\_Needs\_assessment\_report\_Panipat.pdf

Informational pamphlets in Hindi and Haryanvi on sexual harassment at workplace (hard copies will be submitted separately)



Informational pamphlets in Hindi and Haryanvi on sexual gender based violence (hard copies will be submitted separately)



Informational pamphlets on government schemes in Hindi and haryanvi (hard copies will be submitted separately)



Informational game cards on sexual harassment at workplace (hard copies will be submitted separately)





Link to the video depicting journey of change of women domestic workers : Hope and resilience during the Pandemic

https://youtube.com/watch?v=GLYFuLkcgwl&feature=share

