

## Gender inequality and modern slavery

How to break the cycle of  
women and girls' exploitation





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# Executive summary

Supporting women and girls who are victims, survivors or at risk of modern slavery requires a comprehensive, multi-layered response. We hope that the ideas set out in this report can play their part in an effective, inclusive and empowering approach to tackling and ending the exploitation and trafficking of women and girls.

Around the world, women and girls are disproportionately affected by modern slavery because of the gender inequalities that deny them their rights, limit their choices and opportunities, and expose them to risk.

This denial of voice, choice, opportunity and rights operates at every level of women and girls' lives: in their homes, in their schools and workplaces, in their communities, and in the laws, rules, attitudes and norms of the countries and societies they live in. It is this systemic gender inequality and discrimination that exposes women and girls to a greater risk of modern slavery. And where the exploitation, trafficking and abuse of women

and girls exists, it builds on and reinforces these persistent and pervasive structures of gender inequality. This is the vicious cycle of women and girls' exploitation.

Based on what we have learned from our programs supporting partners on the frontlines of tackling modern slavery, this report outlines what we know works and what we can do to break the cycle of women and girls' exploitation. It's not an exhaustive set of recommendations but rather a summary of learning which we are committed to building on over the coming years.

The report identifies key areas where gender inequality and discrimination increases the risks of exploitation, trafficking and abuse faced by women and girls: lack of access to decent work; vulnerability to unsafe migration; exposure to violence and abuse; and lack of access to education and training.

It argues that anti-slavery interventions should incorporate gender-specific strategies - including raising awareness, promoting women's leadership, and harnessing the power of groups - to support women to challenge gender inequality and discrimination and build protections against exploitation and trafficking.

And it argues that systemic change - to tackle the underlying causes of gender inequality and modern slavery - is also necessary to break the cycle and to see an end to both gender injustice and modern slavery.

Drawing on the Freedom Fund's experience in our hotspot programs around the world, this report brings together our learning on how best to support women and girls, mobilise communities, shift gender stereotypes, and start to change the systems, policies and practices that put women and girls at risk of modern slavery.

## 8 ways to tackle the exploitation and trafficking of women and girls

### 1 Support into decent work

Women and girls are forced into exploitative work due to a range of factors related to their gender, including being unable to meet their own, or their family's, basic needs for food, housing or healthcare; lack of access to education, training and vocational opportunities; and lack of voice, rights and the ability to make their own decisions and choices. Supporting women and girls into decent work - including by challenging gender stereotypes about 'women's work' - is a key way of reducing their risk of being trafficked and exploited.

### 2 Support safer migration

Women and girls migrating abroad for work (particularly as domestic workers) are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Providing them with knowledge and skills to make informed choices about migration can help women protect themselves from unsafe migration and exploitative work. There is a pressing need for governments around the world to strengthen the regulatory framework for migration, including bilateral agreements between source and destination countries.

### 3 Support initiatives to address sexual violence and abuse

Sexual violence and abuse is a pervasive feature of the exploitation and trafficking of women and girls. Social attitudes that condone and perpetuate sexual abuse must be challenged and changed. Laws and regulations for prevention and accountability should also be in place. Targeted awareness-raising - including sex education and the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights - can help build a safer environment for women and girls and support them to exert more control and choice over their lives.

### 4 Support fair and equal access to education

Inequality in access to education means girls are less likely than boys to be in, or stay in, school. This makes them more vulnerable to trafficking, abuse and exploitative work. Education remains the single most effective protection for girls against a life of exploitation and abuse, while for survivors and those trapped in exploitative situations, education and skills training can provide a route out of continued exploitation or re-trafficking.

### 5 Support initiatives to challenge harmful gender norms and attitudes

Information-sharing and awareness-raising activities - particularly initiatives that support women and girls to know and claim their rights - provide women and girls with the knowledge and tools to reduce their risk of exploitation. Awareness-raising needs to be accompanied by changes in gender norms to have a long-term, sustainable impact on the inequalities that perpetuate modern slavery.

### 6 Support women's leadership - including survivors' leadership

Leadership of women with lived experience is crucial to the ability of anti-slavery organisations to recognise and tackle the gender inequalities that drive modern slavery. Women's leadership is not only necessary to build a representative and effective anti-slavery movement, it also creates positive impacts in the wider community, providing role models, raising awareness about gender issues and inequalities, and challenging the social norms and power dynamics that underpin the exploitation and trafficking of women and girls.

### 7 Support women's groups - such as self help, savings and loans, and workers' groups

Women and girls are made more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse through isolation and lack of support. Groups provide a space for sharing experiences, finding support and encouragement, gaining skills, and organising for collective action - not only to claim their rights, but to seek wider, transformative change, in their communities and beyond, in gender norms and discriminatory power structures.

### 8 Support initiatives at national and global levels for improved laws and regulations

The exploitation, trafficking and abuse of women and girls is underpinned and enabled by systemic inequalities and structural discrimination. Achieving long-term change requires not just frontline interventions but systemic, structural change. Anti-slavery initiatives can pursue legal avenues to hold abusers to account; collaborate with governments to implement and enforce laws and improve policy and practice; and pressurise and work with businesses to end exploitation in workplaces and along supply chains.

# Introduction

Women and girls comprise over two-thirds of the estimated 40 million people living in modern slavery. But slavery is not just about individuals falling victim to crime. It is about inequalities and the structures which reinforce them, routinely deny power or agency to the most vulnerable, and exploit the most vulnerable for profit.

From commercial sexual exploitation to exploitative domestic work, from bonded labour to sexual abuse or coercion behind factory gates, girls and women experience modern slavery in

ways that reflect deep-rooted attitudes about gender roles, pervasive gender stereotypes, and repressive or oppressive social norms. They are exploited as domestic servants and as low-paid workers in factories or on farms where they also frequently face sexual harassment and abuse. They are trafficked for sex work, often from a young age. They are victims of child marriage or forced marriage, resulting in many cases in a life of forced childbirth and domestic and sexual servitude.

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## Women and girls represent



71% of victims of modern slavery



99% of victims of commercial sexual exploitation



84% of those living in a forced marriage



59% of victims of forced labour

[Global estimates, 2017\*]

This gender discrimination and lack of autonomy – from the individual and household level to the structural and systemic level – is one of the key drivers of the trafficking, exploitation and abuse of women and girls. The ways in which gender inequality and discrimination puts women and girls at greater risk of modern slavery include:

- Lower social status and legal standing
- Lack of voice, autonomy and rights – at individual, household and community level
- Often seen as a financial burden by their families
- Less control of financial assets
- Less access to education and training
- More likely to work in unregulated/informal industries, often hidden from view in private homes, massage parlours or closed factory complexes
- Greater risk of sexual and gender-based violence and abuse
- Less representation in decision- and policy-making.

The need to break the cycle of gender inequality and women and girls' exploitation is becoming ever more urgent. The social and economic consequences of the covid pandemic and the climate crisis mean that, for vulnerable and marginalised people, life is becoming ever more precarious. At the Freedom Fund, we have been closely monitoring the impact of these crises on the people and communities we work with<sup>2</sup> – and we have seen continuing evidence of how deeply interconnected the injustices of gender inequality and modern slavery are.

In many places we have seen a rise in levels of domestic abuse during the covid pandemic, alongside increasing levels of child sexual abuse, child labour and early and forced marriage. We have seen decades of progress on gender equality and women's empowerment start to unravel. We have seen how girls and women, many of them the primary carers and breadwinners for their family, are finding their meagre resources depleted, their lives uprooted, their livelihoods destabilised and their rights and status further undermined – all of which further increases their risks of trafficking, exploitation and abuse.

We have also seen how women and girls who are members of lower castes, ethnic minorities or other marginalised groups are particularly

vulnerable to economic, social and political instability. As well as gender inequality, women and girls often face intersecting forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, caste, and other social, economic or identity characteristics. This underscores the importance of unravelling the way intersecting systems of oppression collude to reinforce and perpetuate the exploitation and trafficking of women and girls.

### **Gender identity and gender inequality**

This report draws on the Freedom Fund's experience supporting partners working predominantly with cisgender women and girls, with the recognition that LGBTQI+ people experience particular and additional discrimination, marginalisation, and risk of exploitation, violence and abuse as a result of their gender identity or expression.

Given the complex set of factors and systemic inequalities that are responsible for the plight of millions of women and girls suffering conditions of slavery, frontline interventions to support victims and survivors, and to tackle the root causes that put women and girls disproportionately at risk, should aim to take a multi-layered approach. They need to centre the lived experiences, needs and desires of victims themselves, supporting them to recover and lead free and independent lives. They need to engage with entire communities to identify and shift harmful gender norms and to provide a safe and supportive environment for women and girls. And they need to work with governments, businesses and other powerful stakeholders to dismantle systemic gender inequalities and discrimination.

Drawing on our experience alongside our partner organisations, our research into what works, and examples of the many successful approaches our frontline partners are taking, we hope that this report can contribute towards a comprehensive, multi-layered response involving all stakeholders, from donors and governments, to survivors, women and girls at risk, and the organisations and groups that they lead and work with. Together, we believe we can start to break the link between gender inequality and the exploitation and trafficking of women and girls, and in so doing support more women and girls to be free from the threat of modern slavery.

# How the Freedom Fund supports women and girls in or at risk of modern slavery

The Freedom Fund partners with frontline organisations in modern slavery 'hotspots' - geographical areas where there is a high incidence of modern slavery and where interventions are likely to have the greatest impact.

This map highlights how our hotspot programs support women and girls in or at risk of modern slavery. Some of these initiatives are specifically targeted at women and girls; others are part of a wider program that supports people of all gender identities or expressions.

More details of Freedom Fund programs are given in the Annex to this report.



- FREEDOM RISING (global)**
- Providing leadership and skills training to women and survivors of exploitation and trafficking
- SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP FUND (global)**
- Providing unrestricted grants to survivor-led organisations, including those that are led by women survivors and/or prioritise the needs of women and girls

- BRAZIL**
- Supporting girls to avoid and leave situations of commercial sexual exploitation
- WEST AFRICA**
- Understanding how to address exploitative child domestic work in Liberia and Nigeria, particularly amongst girls.

- ETHIOPIA**
- Addressing trafficking, exploitation and domestic servitude of Ethiopian women and girls

- INDIA**
- Address conditions of girls, young women and migrant workers in the textile industry in Tamil Nadu
  - Prevent child labour in handicrafts, jewellery and textiles workshops in Rajasthan
  - Work in support of government systems to reduce vulnerability of children in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh

- NEPAL**
- Tackling the commercial sexual exploitation of children (particularly girls) in Kathmandu's adult entertainment sector (program ran from 2015 to 2020)
  - Addressing the forced labour system which traps families, including women and girls, in agricultural debt bondage and domestic work
- BANGLADESH**
- Tackling commercial sexual exploitation of children (particularly girls) in Dhaka

- MYANMAR**
- Addressing the risk of human trafficking in Kachin and northern Shan states, especially amongst women and girls (including for forced marriage)
- THAILAND / INDONESIA**
- Addressing slavery in fishing supply chains, including of women working in seafood processing

# Issues

Based on the Freedom Fund's experience in our hotspot programs, this section outlines four areas where gender inequality is a key driver and enabler of the exploitation and trafficking of women and girls – and where action is needed to address gender inequality and reduce women and girls' vulnerability to modern slavery.

## **Lack of access to decent work**

While the spectrum of vulnerability factors is broad and most victims are driven into slavery by a combination of circumstances and adverse events, the one characteristic that is common to almost all of them is poverty. In hundreds of interviews with victims across our frontline programs, the top reasons people give for why and how they slipped into exploitation were remarkably similar: financial insecurity, lack of access to basic services and affordable credit, and lack of a job or alternative sources of income.

Women and girls are the backbone of most families and communities, shouldering responsibility for family upkeep, child rearing and care of the sick and elderly. At times of hardship, they also face increased pressure to earn money for their family – and increased risks of forced marriage, trafficking or the types of exploitative work that specifically target women and girls and that may be the only source of income that is available. As one 16-year-old girl working at a dance bar in Kathmandu, Nepal, told us: "To support my family, mother used to work there and she was the breadwinner of the family. After she got sick and couldn't continue to work, I went there as her replacement."<sup>3</sup>

When families are struggling to meet their basic needs, this also makes them more vulnerable to unmanageable debt. Many women and girls find themselves in situations of forced or bonded labour as a direct consequence of them or their families having taken out high interest loans to cover loss of income due to an accident, illness or other unforeseen circumstances; to pay medical bills or costs related to wedding ceremonies; or even to buy food during times of acute deprivation.



A self-help group member in northern India raises poultry for income generation. Photo: Freedom Fund

### **Trapped in bonded labour to pay off debts**

One of the Freedom Fund's partner organisations has been working since 2015 with people in a village in northern India where bonded labour was common and many households were trapped in exploitative work because of debt bondage. Having borrowed money at 60% interest per year, they were essentially working to try to pay off their loans.

The program supported a Community Vigilance Committee which helped households to access crucial entitlements such as food ration cards and pensions. The committee also helped people discuss the problem of extremely low wages, and seek advice from other groups who had experienced situations of debt bondage. In addition, women from the village were supported to form a self-help group which enabled them to save money together and buy poultry and goats for income generation.

Across our programs, women and girls face similar risks and share similar experiences of exploitative work. In many places, women are less likely than

men to hold formal identification, inherit or own land, have financial control over economic assets, finish school, attain higher levels of education or receive formal skills training, all of which limits their access to decent jobs and a decent income. As a result, they are more likely to work in unregulated or informal settings, often hidden from view in private homes, massage parlours or closed factory complexes.

Even those working in the same roles as men are consistently earning less than their male counterparts and are subject to additional forms of abuse and harassment not experienced by most men. Many of the women and girls we work with had entered their exploitative work situations at a young age, often deliberately being hired for their vulnerability, low wages and perceived inability to assert their rights. The consequences for their economic prospects and their physical and mental health are often dire.

Our March 2021 report *Preventing trafficking and protecting vulnerable young women through economic empowerment*<sup>4</sup> looked at what is needed to enable vulnerable young women - those from marginalised communities with high rates of human trafficking and other forms of exploitation - to secure and thrive in

more lucrative and rewarding jobs. The research team spoke with young women and survivors of trafficking, as well as with other stakeholders, across three deliberately diverse settings: returning domestic workers in Ethiopia, adult entertainment workers in urban Nepal, and spinning mill workers in rural Tamil Nadu, India. Despite their different contexts, the women had experienced strikingly similar forms of exploitation and shared equally similar views on what a 'good' job would mean for them, emphasising the importance of dignity, respect, safety, a reliable income and opportunities to progress.

### What women want from a 'good' job

- Reliable level of income that is sufficient to cover basic necessities for them and their families
- Security and safety: a sense of control rather than being dependent on others and at risk of physical and emotional abuse
- Dignity and respect: appreciation for the work that they do and respect for them as individuals
- Opportunities to progress into better paid and more rewarding employment.

Supporting women and girls into decent work is a key way to address the needs of survivors and of women and girls at risk of exploitation. However, there is growing recognition amid anti-slavery practitioners that many interventions fail to support women to gain a regular income, meaning they remain vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. Programs that provide training in traditional 'female' skills and vocations, like sewing, jewellery making, food processing or hair and beauty services, inevitably steer participants towards low-paid 'women's work' and can further entrench gender stereotypes and pay gaps.

Micro-enterprise initiatives, which support women to start small business ventures, can lead to successful outcomes, but many women end up earning no more than a supplemental income from their businesses. These small businesses are also more vulnerable to economic shocks and may not provide the kind of security and benefits associated with regular paid employment.

### Lessons to take forward

- Frontline interventions should actively work to challenge stereotypes and societal expectations around what jobs women can and should strive for.
- Thorough market research into local labour needs and viable business opportunities can help improve the effectiveness of vocational training or micro-enterprise initiatives.
- Close collaboration between training providers and potential future employers will help tailor training programs to ensure women receive market-relevant skills and so optimise their job prospects. It can also raise awareness among employers about the obstacles facing survivors (such as stigmatisation, personal trauma and low self-esteem).
- Interventions should be planned and customised around the specific needs of the target group - for example, to ensure women are not prevented from participating by lack of transport or because services are offered at unsuitable times.
- Drawing on their experience of risks faced by women and girls, frontline organisations can seek to help reform traditional industries in which women are prone to facing exploitation.
- Donors and governments could take a more active role in guiding businesses towards better practices through incentives for model employers as well as penalties for those violating the law.
- Women are less likely than men to hold formal identification papers, which can prevent them from accessing government services and make it harder for them to find decent work. Efforts to reduce women's vulnerability to exploitative work could include advocating with government providers to facilitate uptake of government services and helping women obtain relevant papers or navigate application processes.
- Getting families out of debt traps is central to bringing women and girls out of bonded labour. Governments could be called upon to cancel exploitative loans, offer affordable credit and ensure workers of all genders are given appropriate contracts and paid equitably, fairly and regularly.
- In the absence of government credit schemes, NGOs can support the creation of savings and

loans groups, enabling women to save, improve their financial management skills and take out affordable loans to help weather unforeseen crises or invest in their education or small business ventures.

### Helping women find decent work

In Ethiopia, the Freedom Fund has been funding programs since 2015, promoting safer migration and offering rehabilitation support to Ethiopian women migrants returning from often exploitative domestic service in the Middle East and Gulf states. As well as coping with potential trauma alongside the challenges of reintegrating into family and community life, these women often lack the skills and confidence to get formal, long-term jobs in the local employment market. To address this need and reduce the risk of these women being re-trafficked into exploitative work, the Freedom Fund is developing a program designed specifically to place returnee migrants into formal jobs with Ethiopian businesses.

The Thrive program, which is scheduled to launch in April 2022, is seeking to find work for women in a variety of sectors, including hospitality and the garment industry, but also in less traditional women's industries such as construction. The program will work with vocational training service providers in Addis Ababa to identify and engage with prospective employers, liaise with employers to ensure they provide safe and healthy workplaces, match returnee migrant women to suitable jobs, organise vocational and on-the-job training in collaboration with employers, and provide a range of support services - including psychosocial care, mentorship, peer support and childcare - to help ensure that women supported by the program not only find a decent job, but can keep it and thrive in it.

*The Freedom Fund and local partners in Ethiopia support returning survivors who migrated for employment as domestic workers with vocational and on-the jobs skills training, opening the door to new employment opportunities. Photo: Genaye Eshatu/Freedom Fund*





*In addition to skills training, the Freedom Fund and its partners provide housing and counselling to survivors returning to Ethiopia after migrating for employment as domestic workers. Photo: Genaye Eshatu/Freedom Fund*

## Vulnerability to unsafe migration

Millions of people around the world are on the move - within their own country or across borders. Many have been displaced by conflict, political instability, natural disasters and the impacts of climate change, or driven by poverty and economic crisis to seek work elsewhere in the hope of a better life.

With all forms of displacement comes a plethora of risks - especially for women and girls. Amongst the most vulnerable are refugee women and girls, who - forced into unsafe circumstances, with limited resources and protection from abuse - can be easy prey for traffickers and sexual predators. Refugee women's inability to gain nationality or work permits to enter the formal economy further increases their risk of entering into exploitative labour arrangements, including sexual exploitation.

Another high-risk group are women migrating abroad into domestic service or for forced marriage. Locked away in private homes, with their passports confiscated and no access to phones or other means of communication, they are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse while being cut off from any support or assistance. Even where migrant women live

amongst compatriots in relatively settled migrant communities, they lack access to many of the protections and services available to regular citizens.

"Most of us, when we decide to go, we don't have that much information about the place we are going and the things we might face there.... I didn't know anything but my heart was set on going and earning money blindly and that is what hurts us the most, I think.... I had worries but I was not focused on the negative part." - Migrant domestic worker, Ethiopia<sup>5</sup>

"We Ethiopians are fooled. When I saw other women who returned from the Middle East, dressing well, looking glamorous, having money and having changed their life, I said 'I should go and work there and earn money for raising my children, sending my children to a better school and leading a better life.' However, what you thought before going there and what you get after going there are not the same." - Female returnee, Ethiopia<sup>6</sup>

Women and girls face a greater risk of being pushed into situations of unsafe migration because of gender discrimination in relation to their lack of access to jobs and livelihood opportunities, lack of access to education and greater risk of dropping out of school, and negative gender norms and peer pressure.

Often women and girls are ill-prepared for migration with limited knowledge about the working and living conditions of destination countries, the nature and challenges of domestic work overseas, and the potential risks of working abroad including the risk of exploitation and abuse. They can also lack clear or reliable information about the different routes and channels for migration, with the myriad of registered and unregistered brokers and recruitment agencies making it difficult for women to know if they are following regular or irregular channels.

The Freedom Fund and our partners work towards increasing women and girls' knowledge about safe migration, so that they can make informed decisions about migrating. Building women's skills prior to departure, including language and professional skills, will improve their chances of being able to migrate safely and reduce their risks of exploitation and abuse. Our partners also work in collaboration with authorities to ensure that recruitment agencies are properly overseen and comply with regulations that are there to protect women through their migration journey.

Upon return to their home countries, migrant women workers who faced exploitation and abuse are usually in need of comprehensive reintegration and rehabilitation support. Given prevailing gender stereotypes and widespread assumptions about sexual abuse of migrant women, these returnees often face considerable social stigma – far more so than male returnees. Without targeted support to address their trauma and enable them to build viable, independent livelihoods, they face a high risk of re-trafficking or re-migration.

Tensions between migrants and host communities, and returnees and their home communities, have been heightened by the covid crisis, which led to large and unexpected flows of migrants being sent back home or getting stuck en route. Our covid response operations in Ethiopia, India and Nepal experienced first-hand the additional pressures of responding not just to local needs but to the needs of migrant and returnee arrivals in the middle of a pandemic.

### **Supporting migrant workers returning to Ethiopia**

In December 2020, the Freedom Fund and our partner Agar began the Bete reintegration project with the support of the Ethiopian embassy in Lebanon. The project was established in response to the political and economic crisis in Lebanon, exacerbated by the covid pandemic and Beirut explosion, and it aimed to repatriate Ethiopian women who were stranded in Lebanon, where they had been working as domestic workers.

The project provides comprehensive support to returnees to re-establish their lives back in Ethiopia. Women are supported to travel back to Ethiopia where they are provided with accommodation in one of Agar's shelters, support with meeting their immediate needs (including medical help and/or psychiatric counselling), and longer-term counselling and vocational training and guidance to help them find decent, alternative work. Agar supports women with their social reintegration too, tracing family members and providing ongoing accompaniment while women settle back with their families and communities. Agar is also assisting returnees in pursuing a case against a broker with whom the women were in situations of debt bondage.

### **Lessons to take forward**

- Governments of migrants' home countries should take responsibility for protecting their citizens from harm. This includes passing and enforcing laws and regulations that support safe migration; ensuring bilateral agreements with destination countries are respected; and providing support to migrants in destination countries if required (such as the Ethiopian government's labour attachés, based at Ethiopian embassies, who support Ethiopian women migrant workers in the Middle East and Gulf states).
- Governments of migrants' source communities should ensure that legal channels are less bureaucratic and more affordable and accessible to all potential migrants who want to pursue a legal pathway. Most irregular migrants choose irregular paths because legal channels are not easily accessible to them.



*As part of the Bete reintegration program, Frealem chose poultry for her vocational skill training. Today she is the proud owner of a successful growing business. Photo: Genaye Eshatu/Freedom Fund*

- Host governments should respect and protect the rights of migrant populations on their territory, including by giving them legal status and providing adequate access to basic services. Civil society organisations should collaborate with relevant authorities to encourage them to fulfil their responsibilities; support migrant communities to obtain legal status and access services; and collect data about, and consult with, migrant communities in order to design effective interventions on their behalf. These interventions should also consider the needs of vulnerable locals in host communities to help reduce prejudice against and marginalisation of migrant women.
- Prevention and early intervention are crucial. Women and girls at risk of considering – or being pushed into – unsafe migration often have inadequate knowledge about the realities of working and living abroad, and are vulnerable to being misled about their earning potential, the nature and difficulty of domestic labour, and the likelihood of abuse. Awareness-raising is most effective when it is conducted by and with survivors who have themselves returned from exploitative work abroad and can provide credible, first-hand accounts to their peers.
- Women at risk of unsafe migration might be aware of the risks but have little choice but to take those risks. Support with acquiring the skills and opportunities to access decent work in their own community or country can help women avoid being forced to take the risk of unsafe migration.
- Women who make informed decisions about migrating should be supported to build the right set of skills to improve their chances of being able to migrate safely and reduce their risks of exploitation and abuse. For example, language training for migrant women can improve their chances of safe employment and significantly reduce the risk of them being tricked and taken advantage of in a foreign country.
- Financial literacy training can help women to manage and save their income while abroad and upon their return.
- Support for returned migrant women should include mental health support to cope with trauma, stigma and the challenges of reintegrating into their families and home communities; and livelihoods support to reduce the risk of re-trafficking.

## Exposure to violence and abuse

Sexual violence and abuse – or the threat of it – is a pervasive theme blighting women’s lives across all countries and cultures, often from a young age, with serious physical and mental health consequences. This abuse is an expression and tool of male power and domination – and for too many women and girls, it is a manifestation of the control over and exploitation of another person that constitutes modern slavery.

While broader vulnerability factors like poverty, membership of marginalised ethnic groups or castes, and the prevalence of harmful gender norms greatly increase women’s exposure to sexual violence, women and girls in (or at risk of) slavery are one of the world’s most at-risk groups. They are trafficked specifically for sex work. They are victims of child marriage or forced marriage. They experience sexual violence and abuse as a daily occurrence in the factories, fields and private homes where they are trapped in exploitative work.

The sexual violence and abuse that these women and girls experience is often ignored, tolerated, or even specifically enabled by their families and communities. Many of the girls and women trafficked into sex work, or into domestic servitude, forced marriages, or exploitative work where sexual violence and abuse is commonplace, are led into those positions by relatives or friends acting as intermediaries. To make matters worse, survivors of modern slavery then face stigma and ostracism for being victims of sexual abuse when they return to their communities.

Children in domestic work are particularly at risk of exploitation and servitude, especially girls. Domestic work is one of the most common forms of paid work among girls in Ethiopia – especially girls who migrate from rural to urban areas – and is typically characterised by low pay, long working hours, few or no days off, limited or restricted freedom of movement, lack of access to education and health care, denial of privacy and safe living conditions, and in some cases discriminatory behaviour, punishments, psychological and physical violence, and being required to provide sexual services or prostitution.<sup>7</sup>

The Freedom Fund is working with our partners in Ethiopia to improve the treatment and working conditions of child domestic workers – many of them girls – and reduce risks of exploitation and abuse. In Ethiopia, the issue of child domestic workers remains complex and culturally sensitive. The employer is often perceived as a benefactor, and child domestic work is seen as a positive work environment compared to other jobs, especially for girls.

This attitude is fundamentally rooted in gender stereotypes and the perpetuation of gender roles and responsibilities. Domestic work for girls is seen as appropriate training for adulthood and marriage, further reinforcing in the public consciousness the idea that child domestic work is a good thing. Our work with partners in Ethiopia partly focuses on addressing this harmful perception of girls and changing norms and behaviours of employers and communities that condone mistreatment and abuse.

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## Sexual violence against women: a global problem



1 in 3 women will experience physical or sexual violence in her lifetime<sup>8</sup>

**15**  
million

15 million girls aged 15-19 have experienced forced sex<sup>9</sup>



99% of victims of commercial sex trafficking are female<sup>10</sup>

Across a number of our hotspot programs, the Freedom Fund and our partners are working to help women and girls exit exploitative situations and to support their sustainable recovery – and where possible, to prevent them from falling victim to abuse in the first place. The abuse suffered by these women and girls includes commercial sexual exploitation in Nepal, Brazil and Bangladesh, forced and early marriage of women from Myanmar in China, and physical and sexual abuse of Ethiopian domestic workers. Through our partners’ intensive engagement in these programs with survivors, women and girls at risk, and those working with them, we can draw a number of valuable lessons about the most useful approaches.

### **Supporting survivors in Myanmar**

In Myanmar, where women and girls are trafficked into China for forced marriage or within Myanmar for sex work, our local partners have been working amid extremely difficult conditions throughout the covid pandemic and recent political upheaval to support women survivors. Freedom Fund partners have been assisting both domestic survivors and those returning from China with food, shelter, emergency kits, medicine, livelihoods support, psychosocial counselling and travel assistance. They also offer legal advice in cases of human trafficking.

Our partner organisations have continued to maintain a presence in communities through outreach work and community groups. They have been conducting anti-trafficking awareness training for women in villages, who can then share their knowledge with family members, friends, co-workers and neighbours. Some were selected and trained as community mobilisers to help facilitate future activities. Throughout the crisis, partners continued to set up, support and mentor dozens of village community groups to provide safe spaces for women to share experiences and receive training.

### **Lessons to take forward**

- Given the high prevalence of sexual abuse among women living in or at risk of slavery, all frontline interventions should offer, or facilitate referrals to, specialist trauma and health services.
- Targeted awareness-raising among at-risk groups and their communities can be an effective tool to protect vulnerable women and girls. It works particularly well when survivors are engaged as facilitators of women’s groups and awareness-raising activities, as people are far more likely to trust and accept information provided by a peer with first-hand experience.
- Sexual abuse (in women and girls’ personal lives) and sexual exploitation (for material gain) are interconnected. Preventing abuse from happening in the first place is a fundamental strategy to reduce the vulnerability of girls to also being sexually exploited. This includes providing appropriate sexual education (including challenging the attitudes among boys that normalise abuse), teaching girls self-protection skills and attitudes, and the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights.
- There is a direct link between poverty and women and girls’ vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Provision of basic services, education and livelihood support are therefore key to any program aiming to sustainably liberate and rehabilitate women and girls.
- NGOs and activists should consistently call on governments to put in place the necessary regulatory frameworks to protect women and girls, and importantly, to underpin any government-led raids or sex-trafficking crackdowns with comprehensive, multi-sectoral rehabilitation support to liberated women and girls to reduce their risk of re-trafficking.
- Sexual violence against women is often a manifestation of patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes. More investment is needed to research and develop effective interventions to change the attitudes and behaviours of men, and to promote a more progressive notion of masculinity.

## Supporting girls at risk of commercial sexual exploitation

In Brazil, where most victims of the commercial sexual exploitation of children are *meninas afrodescendentes* (girls with African ancestry) from the poorest and most vulnerable communities, the Freedom Fund has been working with frontline partner organisations to reach girls who are survivors of, or at risk of, commercial sexual exploitation. Our partner organisations are providing resources to prevent risk and supporting girls with rehabilitation and reintegration, alongside working to promote a more protective family and community environment.

- Instituto Aliança provides assistance to girls through training in life and digital skills, and individual follow-up and referral to other services including health, education, protection, legal and psychosocial services. The training methodology is based on the intersectionality of race, class and gender inequalities. Partnerships have been established with Unicef for providing menstrual pads and with educational institutions for girls' inclusion in apprenticeship training programs.
- Coletivo Mulher Vida is accompanying and supporting girl survivors of sexual and domestic violence, most of whom live in care services, to avoid new risk situations, as well as interrupt processes of violence against them. Girls take part in therapeutic groups whose goal is to build trust, help break the cycle of silence around abuse and reframe traumatic experiences. They

also receive individual psychosocial support and are assisted to develop their life plans. Young leaders use social media to provide information to their peers on gender issues such as health and reproductive rights.

- Casa Menina Mulher is assisting girls at risk of commercial sexual exploitation through a range of activities including community therapy, conversation circles, citizenship and cultural activities, individual psychosocial support, food support and work with families. Girls are being empowered to overcome fear, break the silence and disclose situations of sexual abuse to trusted adults, and are learning to self-protect and recognise and develop their potential.
- Grupo Adolescer provides training to adolescents and young people from four communities on prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation and human trafficking, self-care and safe use of the internet. After the training, they develop awareness materials and deliver information in schools and streets to their peers and residents of the communities.
- Grupo Ruas e Praças carries out outreach to children in the streets, in areas of high prevalence of commercial sexual exploitation. Using educational, playful/recreational and cultural/artistic activities, the initiative focuses on building trust and providing information, individual support, workshops and family visits to increase awareness of sexual exploitation, build children's emotional strength, and help them build new life projects.



Young people lead a campaign to end violence against children in Recife, Brazil. Photo: Grupo Adolescer



Women attend a community meeting in Terai in southeastern Nepal. Photo: Geneva Global/Jenna Mulhall-Brereton

## Lack of access to education

Across all the Freedom Fund's hotspots, girls are less likely to receive quality education and more likely to drop out. This makes them more vulnerable to abuse and trafficking and reinforces negative gender perceptions of women as uneducated and less capable.

Low standards of girls' education in northern India have been shown to increase their vulnerability to sex trafficking; significant gender disparity in the Ethiopian education system leaves few options for girls and young women but to seek work as domestic workers at home or abroad; and in south-eastern Nepal, parents can often only afford to pay for one of their (preferably male) children to be educated, increasing their daughters' risk of child marriage or child labour.

### **"To get out of poverty, we need to get our rights."**

As part of its community work in Ram Naika village in northern India, Freedom Fund partner organisation Adithi supported an adolescent girls' group. Members of the group said that when they were younger, some of the girls had been going to school, but as they became older, their parents made them drop out. When the adolescent group started, it gave the girls a new opportunity for education and skills training. Members were divided into smaller groups who met for basic education as well as life skills training and discussions about topics such as early marriage and health.

When asked about what they hoped could improve, group members talked not just about improved access to a quality education, but also about deeper changes for themselves and their community. As one said: "I want equal opportunities with my brothers, to go out to distant places to study. To get out of poverty, we need to get our rights."

In many interviews with girls and parents participating in our programs, we hear an almost universal desire for education and a deep belief in its transformative potential. Education remains the single most effective protection for girls against a life of exploitation, abuse and poverty. If we can bring them into and keep them in schools - and support improvements in schools and the quality of education - we substantially lower their risk of early marriage, trafficking and sexual exploitation, while they gain increased confidence and self-worth alongside the knowledge and qualifications that can help them get better jobs and achieve their ambitions for the future.

And for girls and young women already trapped in exploitative situations, education and skills training can provide a route out of continued exploitation or re-trafficking.

### **From school drop-out to teacher and community champion**

Afsari Khatun, from Sitamarhi in northern India, had repeatedly dropped out of school due to family pressure. But with long-term support and counselling provided by our partner organisation, Afsari not only completed her education – she is now a teacher and a ‘community champion’ for the rights of her fellow community members. She makes sure village children are enrolled in school, supports their families in making written applications for entitlements such as government food benefits, and links village women to government livelihoods schemes.

Schools can also play an important role in equipping girls with the knowledge and skills to protect themselves against exploitation and abuse. This includes not just education on risks and rights, but a comprehensive approach to changing the attitudes and norms that underpin girls’ vulnerability.

In Brazil, the lack of gender and sex education in schools contributes to the perpetuation of models of toxic masculinity and social attitudes that see sexual abuse and exploitation of women and girls as a normal practice. The Freedom Fund’s partner in Brazil, Fundação Roberto Marinho, is developing materials and methodologies through Canal Futura – its TV network focused on education – to inform and empower educators, children and families about how to protect children from different forms of violence, especially sexual abuse and exploitation. The school-based educational programs aim to improve girls’ knowledge, self-protective behaviours and likelihood of disclosure, and promote changes in toxic behaviours of boys.

### **Lessons to take forward**

- Supporting access to education is in itself a key way to reduce girls’ vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation. Anti-slavery initiatives should offer tailored support for girls at risk of trafficking or exploitation to enable them to go to, and stay in, school.
- Support needs to be multi-faceted and flexible to address the range of obstacles that prevent girls going to school, from practical support like the provision of sanitary and hygiene materials, to mental health support for survivors.

- Initiatives to educate girls about trafficking risks – for example, through education materials or awareness campaigns aimed at school-age girls – can provide them with the awareness and knowledge to identify risks and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.
- Education on gender and sexuality should be part of all basic education, based on respect for and promotion of the sexual and reproductive rights of all people, especially women and girls, in all their diversity.

### **Supporting girls’ education to create change in Ethiopia**

Freedom Fund partners in Ethiopia are working with education authorities and schools on a range of initiatives to support girls into education and to raise awareness about the risks of unsafe migration, exploitation and trafficking. Examples include:

- Bethsaida Restoration Development Association (BRDA) assists girls who are identified as most at risk of dropping out of school to stay in education by providing scholastic materials, sanitary and hygiene materials, and information on safer migration.
- Mission for Community Development Program (MCDP) reaches hundreds of students through music and drama clubs that perform skits related to safer migration and through the distribution of information materials. MCDP also sets up peer groups which focus on safer migration and anti-trafficking messages, as well as on developing skills related to assertiveness, self-confidence, decision-making, communication and health.
- Professional Alliance for Development (PADet) provides training to girls and women on facilitating discussion groups in their schools and communities.
- The Organisation for the Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Integration of Female Street Children (OPRIFS) assists domestic workers – including women and children – with educational services provided at a local school after school hours and with permission from their employers.

# Strategies

Based on what we have learned through our work with partners in our hotspot programs and globally, this section outlines four key strategies for supporting women's empowerment and addressing the underlying, systemic causes of modern slavery.

## **Raising awareness, shifting norms**

Information-sharing and awareness-raising activities provide women and girls with the knowledge and tools that can help them protect themselves from exploitation. Awareness content can be presented in a variety of ways from printed materials to in-person talks, media stories and social media campaigns, radio programs or travelling theatre productions. Initiatives that bring people together for further discussion provide opportunities for peer support, movement building and collective advocacy. Awareness-raising campaigns have the most impact when they are tailored and relevant to the personal context and experience of their target audience.

### **"Believe me, you can!"**

Workers in spinning mills in southern India are mostly female and a high proportion are adolescent girls from poor families. While their brothers go to school, they work long hours, often in unhealthy conditions and with inadequate employment rights and protections.

In 2018, the Freedom Fund's local NGO partners and Novo Media developed a film-based curriculum to support young women and girls in affected communities. The film, based on interviews with over 60 mill workers and the life stories of 308 individuals, centres on a girl who experiences family troubles and goes to work in a spinning mill. The locally-made Tamil language film is then used as a basis for participatory discussion and learning sessions.

By recognising the reality of their lives as young workers, *Call Me Priya* gives girls and young women the knowledge they need to recognise and protect their rights around education, working conditions, workplace



A still from the film *Call Me Priya* used by partners for discussions and lessons regarding vulnerable women working in industry.

harassment and mental health. Thousands of girls and young women have completed the curriculum and a 2019 evaluation<sup>11</sup> found that the approach led to:

- A decrease in the proportion of girls age 15 and under who were out of school
- Positive changes in adolescent girls' attitudes towards seeking gender-equitable employment and safer working conditions
- Greater knowledge of wage entitlements
- Improvements reported by participants in their mental health, resilience, and confidence to speak up about sexual harassment at work and to take stronger action in the face of employer bullying.

Initiatives that support girls and women to understand and claim their rights can have a powerful impact in enabling them to avoid or escape exploitation. But while gender inequality remains deeply embedded in our societies, the social attitudes and economic pressures that underpin and drive exploitation will continue to put women and girls at risk. Awareness-raising needs to be accompanied by changes in gender norms to have a long-term, sustainable impact on the inequalities that perpetuate modern slavery.

Normative and behaviour change campaigns – aiming, for example, to reduce demand for sex work, or to challenge the acceptability of child marriage or exploitative child domestic work – can move the needle, but experience shows that normative change is slow, incremental and hard-won.

In Nepal, our partner organisation ran a seven-month campaign in 2019 targeting customers and business owners in the adult entertainment sector in Kathmandu. While gender inequality is a key driver of the commercial sexual exploitation of children – for example, girls are more likely to

have dropped out of school, or may be driven to leave home to escape gender-based violence – the program targeted the attitudes that lead men to purchase sex with girls.

Using a variety of media, the campaign focused on positive messaging with the aim of encouraging men to change their behaviour by accepting that not engaging sexually with underage girls will be positive for them, will be supported by their peers and is something they have the capabilities and drive to do. However, a follow-up study<sup>12</sup> showed that while the campaign had some immediate impact, any change in attitudes was short-lived – indicating that messages need to be reiterated over time, and delivered in multiple forms, to have a sustained impact.

These lessons are also being applied and tested in other countries: in Brazil, the Freedom Fund is developing a new study on the social norms underpinning the engagement of men in sexual exploitation of children in the Northeast of the country, to inform the design of future campaigns targeting potential perpetrators.

### **Raising awareness of online risks**

Around the world, the covid pandemic has not only increased the use of the internet by girls, but also the risks they face in the online environment. On Internet Safe Day in 2021, Freedom Fund partner Fundação Roberto Marinho launched a new TV and online cartoon series in response to concerns that girls in Brazil were increasingly being groomed through social media and exposed to inappropriate online content.

The cartoon series – part of the Growing Without Violence project, a joint initiative by Canal Futura, Childhood Brasil, Unicef, Google, Facebook, Instagram, Maria Cecilia Souto Vidigal Foundation and the Freedom Fund – uses child-friendly language to address the risks that children, especially girls, face online at different ages, and protective strategies that can be used by them and their families. The series has been widely broadcast on TV, websites and social media in Brazil, and received the Best Children's Micro Programme Award from Televisión America Latina for its contribution to increasing public awareness on the growing risks – including risks of grooming for sexual abuse and exploitation – faced online by children and young people.



Women's leadership helps challenge social norms and power dynamics that put women and girls at risk of exploitation. Photo: Studio M/Freedom Fund

### Lessons to take forward

- Awareness-raising works best when the messaging is specific to the particular situation and target group, and when it can point to clear benefits for the participants if they take on board the advice that's given.
- Community groups (like self-help groups, women's groups, workers' associations, savings and loans groups) are ideal vehicles for dissemination of awareness-raising content, and they provide the opportunity for participants to then turn that awareness into joint activism.
- Changing attitudes and norms is a complex and long-term undertaking and requires investment in repeated and sustained interventions.

### A multi-media campaign to drive real change

Across the world, domestic work is a strongly gendered issue, with girls taking on household and childcare responsibilities from an early age - both within their family, and outside the home as child domestic workers. As an analysis conducted for the Freedom Fund puts it: "in essence, girls and young women are structurally groomed for the role of domestic worker".<sup>13</sup> It is no surprise that almost 70%

of the estimated 17 million child domestic workers worldwide - the majority of them living in conditions of servitude, debt bondage, exploitation or abuse - are girls.

In Ethiopia, the Freedom Fund is partnering with Girl Effect to design and implement a norms and behaviour change campaign called Chora - an Amharic word meaning 'beam of light' - aiming to change the way child domestic workers are perceived and treated and to reduce the worst forms of exploitation.

The multi-channel campaign seeks to engage and open a conversation with the employers of child domestic workers. Using TV slots and social media content, encouraging responses through SMS messages to dilemmas raised as the story unfolds, and promoting activities, events and community discussions through posters, flyers and billboards, the campaign will prompt employers to challenge their own attitudes and consider how they can treat child domestic workers better - for example, by sending them to school and reducing their working hours. It aims to 'nudge' forward changes in attitudes through engagement, discussion, repetition and reinforcement.

## Supporting women's leadership

Although women and girls represent over 70% of those in slavery today, very few women or survivors are supported to become leaders of organisations working to tackle modern slavery. But if frontline organisations are to effectively address the ways that women and girls are disproportionately affected by trafficking and exploitation, they must first advance gender justice amongst their leadership and in their organisations. Evidence suggests that women's leadership not only strengthens the impact of organisations working with women and girls, but effectively challenges gender inequality and discrimination - both inside and outside their organisations.<sup>14</sup>

Anti-slavery organisations led by women will also have knock-on effects in the communities in which they work, challenging the very social norms and power dynamics that place women and girls at risk of modern slavery.

These insights were behind the launch in 2020 of our Freedom Rising program, which aims to directly address the lack of support for and representation of women and survivors in the movement to end slavery. Course content highlights the value of lived experience, builds the skills and confidence to lead more effective organisations, and covers issues such as bias, discrimination and challenging social norms. Participants are equipped to identify and understand power structures and become advocates for gender justice and survivor leadership both within and beyond their organisations.

### Survivor Leadership Fund

Survivors with lived experience of exploitation (including human trafficking, forced labour, bonded labour or forced marriage) know what is needed to support victims and people at risk - and they have the legitimacy to advocate for the changes in policy and practice that can bring about an end to modern slavery. Yet organisations with survivors of modern slavery in key leadership positions are few and far between.

That's why the Freedom Fund set up the Survivor Leadership Fund, an innovative funding approach that provides unrestricted grants with minimal reporting requirements to survivor-led organisations - meaning that they can decide how best to spend the funds to build their

capacity and improve their impact. The first round of grants in 2021 went to organisations in Kenya and Uganda that prioritise the rights of women and girls - including tackling the trafficking of girls for forced marriage; supporting women and girls who are survivors of forced marriage by providing shelter, food and clothing; promoting the economic empowerment of women; and running awareness and advocacy campaigns on sexual harassment, violence and exploitation.

### Lessons to take forward

- Leadership of women survivors is crucial to the ability of anti-slavery organisations to recognise and tackle the gender inequalities that drive modern slavery.
- Women's leadership creates positive impacts in the wider community, providing role models, raising awareness about gender issues and inequalities, and challenging the social norms and power dynamics that underpin modern slavery.
- Anti-slavery organisations function within deeply patriarchal societies and conscious efforts need to be made within these organisations, and by funders, to support and enable women leaders to emerge.

### Migrant women lead the way

Since 2016, the Freedom Fund has been supporting a group of migrant women in Ethiopia to become 'change agents' for safer migration. Initially, the group received training to enable them to share their experience as domestic workers overseas with potential migrants and to provide moral support to survivors. The group then began sharing their insights with a number of migration initiatives working with returnees and survivors.

From 2019, the women organised themselves into a survivor leadership group in order to have a greater impact on communities, including through an increased focus on advocacy and becoming mentors and active partners in the Freedom Fund's work in Ethiopia. In December 2021, the group was officially registered under the name Kasma, with the aim of breaking down the barriers and stigma faced by returnees and becoming change agents to mobilise resources, advocate for systems change, and empower women to lead frontline efforts to end modern slavery.

## Unlocking the power of groups

Many of the women and girls we work with find themselves isolated and without support. From a young age, women and girls in many societies are taught to suppress their own needs, be quiet and obedient and derive their value solely from the service they provide to others. They are brought up to expect that their opinions will be secondary to those of men, that they will not be listened to, and that they will not be heard. This is the lived reality of gender inequality for many women and girls - and one that leaves them little defence against trafficking and exploitation.

A key way to support women and girls to begin to transform their lives is by providing a safe space and supportive environment for them to share their experiences, find their own voice, be part of a community of other women and girls, and be supported to seek change through individual and collective action.

With and through our frontline partner organisations - many of them staffed by women and survivors - we catalyse and support the formation of community groups as the single most impactful and durable way to strengthen self-help structures, generate solidarity, promote information-sharing and end the marginalisation of the most vulnerable women and girls through collective action at the community level and beyond.

These groups can take different shapes and convene for different purposes, ranging from adolescent girls' groups, women's groups, community self-help groups or savings and loans groups, to worker organisations, micro-enterprise support groups and survivor networks. In our experience, the most successful groups are those that are specific and relevant to a particular demographic (people of the same age group, occupation or sharing the same trauma) and that can provide tangible benefits like training, access to credit or the prospect of improved working conditions.

### Women organising together as workers

The Freedom Fund's partners have supported over 300 workers' groups in Tamil Nadu, India who meet inside the workplace, in their villages, or in migrant settlements. Most of the members are women. The groups are supported to discuss workplace issues that

affect them; the gender norms and social attitudes that hold them back from taking action; information on their legal rights; and how to take collective action on issues such as pay, working hours, and health and safety at work, including the right to be safe from sexual harassment.

These workers' groups are achieving real change in their workplaces. For example, a group for female workers at several textile mills has achieved a reduction in shifts from 12 hours to 8 hours; a 50% increase in wages; longer lunch breaks; and a reduction in verbal abuse by supervisors. The groups have also successfully achieved changes in their communities: the same textile workers' group has secured a vehicle to take children safely to school; improvements to the village water well; and the provision of toilets for households to improve sanitation and reduce health risks.<sup>15</sup>

Women's groups don't just aim for practical changes and improvements in the group members' daily lives. They also use the groups as a platform for seeking wider, transformative change in relation to the risk of exploitation and in gender norms. Not only does participation in groups increase women's ability to permanently escape situations of forced or bonded labour; communities as a whole reap the benefits of greater inclusivity, better dialogue and the unquestionable positive difference made by women who are empowered to be more economically productive and assume a more prominent role in community decision-making.

Groups can also help to build community resilience to economic shocks and to deliver emergency relief and support in times of crisis. Women suffer disproportionately in all crises while at the same time bearing the main responsibility for their families' and their communities' resilience and coping mechanisms.<sup>16</sup> Women's self-help groups play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable people during crises such as the covid pandemic. And when a personal or family crisis hits, savings and loans groups - the majority of whose members are women - offer financial support to meet immediate family needs, pay for health care and school fees, or to help them sustain their small business or find alternative sources of income.



A local self-help group meets in Tamil Nadu, India. Photo: Studio M/Freedom Fund

### How groups empower women and communities

In Myanmar, our partner organisation has supported women to set up self-help groups with a dual function: as savings and loans groups, increasing women's financial literacy and providing loans at times of need or for investment in income-generating activities; and as a safe space to discuss relevant issues in their communities. Members take responsibility for disseminating information from training sessions and meetings to their respective communities and act as contacts and facilitators for wider community engagement. After initial support to establish the groups, women received training on a number of topics, including:

- Human trafficking, including clear guidance on reporting procedures for cases and referral pathways in the form of referral handbooks outlining the process and listing phone numbers of the key service providers
- Labour law and labour rights, including reporting procedures in cases of violation of these rights
- Safe use of social media, which is a critical source of information and platform for information-sharing for communities.

The groups also held regular dialogue sessions, which centred around the economic and social impact of the covid pandemic and potential ways to support their communities.

### Lessons to take forward

- Women's groups provide women with a safe space to share experiences and find peer support and encouragement.
- Groups provide a space for information-sharing and awareness-raising – for example, on legal rights – and for organising and delivering skills training (such as financial literacy training).
- Groups provide a platform for learning about harmful gender norms. They can be a springboard for effective community and political action to tackle the attitudes and power structures that lead to exploitation and abuse.
- Self-help groups and savings and loans groups can help women and communities to build long-term resilience and the ability to respond to crises (for example, to the economic impacts of external shocks such as the covid pandemic and the climate crisis).
- Workers' groups can help women to achieve positive changes in workplace terms and conditions.
- The aim should be to build a varied 'tapestry' of different groups to accommodate and address different demographics and needs.

## Advocating for systems change

While anti-slavery programs often focus on women and girls experiencing or at risk of exploitation - meeting their material and emotional needs and supporting them to live independent lives and assert their rights - the systemic inequalities and structural discrimination that fuel exploitation run deep and need to be tackled to achieve sustainable change.

Decisive action by governments and other stakeholders is needed if the drivers of slavery are to be dismantled. Governments need to pass and enforce laws and regulations on gender equality, decent work, child labour, sex-trafficking, safe migration, etc. They need to punish perpetrators and enact programs to improve women's and girls' education and economic status.

To create incentives for governments to act, it is vital that civil society organisations engage in effective strategic advocacy campaigns as well as supporting affected communities to mobilise and advocate for their own rights. The collective voices of grassroots organisations and the communities they work with can be a powerful influence in making the case for change, especially when faced by policy-makers' reluctance to acknowledge the extent of discrimination and exploitation and address the systemic inequalities that underpin it.

At the Freedom Fund, we have been steadily increasing our support to grassroots partners to help them build advocacy capacity and to join forces in shared advocacy initiatives as part of a movement for change. This has resulted in significant shifts in government policies in countries like Ethiopia and Nepal. But it is not enough for a government to pass laws or ratify international human, labour and women's rights conventions. Laws need enforcing and policies need implementing. The Freedom Fund supports our partners to liaise and collaborate with governments on the formulation and implementation of policies covering issues like equal employment rights, equal pay, child marriage and girls' education, and on monitoring of field level interventions to enable change for those who are most vulnerable.

## Deterring exploitation through stronger laws and effective enforcement

The adult entertainment sector in Kathmandu is known to be a harmful place for children (mostly girls) to work. Our Nepal hotspot program set out to change this. Successful advocacy by our partners helped bring about improvements in legislation - including making it illegal for children to work, or even be present, in adult entertainment sector venues, with a penalty of 15 years in prison for non-compliance.

Partners then shifted their advocacy focus to enforcement, working closely with federal and local government, police and venue owners to bring about an increase in monitoring and enforcement. This included the formation by the police of a dedicated Anti Human Trafficking Bureau, and successful advocacy by our partners for the inclusion in Nepal's Community Police Partnership approach of activities to tackle the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

These initiatives have contributed to a reduction in the number of minors working in the adult entertainment sector, with an independent evaluation finding that the efforts to change laws and increase inspections were the most instrumental factors behind the reduction.<sup>17</sup>

Thanks to their embeddedness in affected communities, our partner organisations can act as a key knowledge resource for government representatives about the needs of vulnerable women and girls in communities, while working with women to help them access available government services and encouraging them to self-organise and assert their rights.

The Freedom Fund's hotspot in Tamil Nadu, southern India, is a good example of this collaborative approach. Our program aims to promote child protection in textile production areas through a comprehensive strategy that involves supporting government bodies to promote labour protections; assisting organisations that work with communities to gain access to government schemes and entitlements; supporting children and adolescents in their education; and working with mill management to offer training and build capacity.



The Freedom Fund advocates for improved working conditions for women in various sectors, including seafood processing in Thailand. Photo: Adobe Stock

### **Working with government to improve policy and practice**

In Ethiopia, Freedom Fund partners have successfully collaborated with the government to promote safer migration of female domestic workers (primarily to the Middle East and Gulf states) and the reintegration of returning domestic workers. Achievements in 2021 include:

- Revisions to the regulations for legal migration to cancel the minimum educational requirement of grade 8 - which was forcing many women who had not completed their education to pursue unregulated and unsafe migration routes
- Advocating for and supporting the development of a National Migration Policy, including contributing to the development of Migration Governance Indicators which will be used to monitor the implementation of the policy
- Supporting the development and operationalisation of the National Referral Mechanism for victims of trafficking and other vulnerable migrants which is using the standard operating procedures for reintegration of returnees introduced by our innovative Bete project

- Providing training (through the Bete project) to government focal points on how to provide support to human trafficking survivors in the community, including following up with women who have been reintegrated to offer continued support and links to government services.

Businesses - like the adult entertainment sector in Kathmandu - are key targets of advocacy and dialogue. If they can be incentivised to improve working conditions for women and refrain from employing and exploiting young girls, the effects can be transformative for all involved. While the willingness of employers to engage constructively varies, we have seen many positive responses from business owners, especially when there were clear business benefits to be gained. For example, our *Child labour free Jaipur* campaign places a focus on outreach and partnership with local businesses to encourage them to lead as champions for child-labour-free production. By promoting the future growth of these businesses, mobilising entire neighbourhoods to move decisively against child labour and embarking on a large-scale awareness campaign in the city, the program aims to fundamentally change practices related to child labour in Jaipur.

### **Pursuing legal avenues**

A key way for women survivors to empower themselves is to claim their legal rights - including by pursuing legal redress for the exploitation they have experienced. In Myanmar, Freedom Fund partners have supported survivors to pursue legal cases against perpetrators, usually the brokers or individuals responsible for recruiting and delivering the women into situations of exploitation. Survivors were advised on their legal options, prepared for giving witness statements, provided with court representation and offered psychosocial counselling throughout the process. In 2020, this approach led to multiple convictions with 10-year prison sentences.

Our programs also provide training to law enforcement bodies - police and judges

- to improve investigation and ultimately prosecution of cases. For example, in Ethiopia, workshops and training sessions are held for police, prosecutors, and social affairs officials, to explain key aspects of the legal framework and common breaches of labour and anti-trafficking laws relevant to child domestic work.

At a global level, we support strategic litigation to compel businesses to provide redress for and prevent forced labour and human trafficking in their supply chains. Our long-term goal is to support the development of a global ecosystem wherein NGOs, lawyers and advocates can collaborate on corporate accountability strategies to drive change in company behaviour.<sup>18</sup>



Achieving real change for women and girls requires complex interventions to support and empower vulnerable communities, shift government and employer policies and promote a broader societal rethink of gender norms.

However, even the most effective local or regional effort will not, in itself, change the wider global power dynamics and market forces that are combining to perpetuate slavery. These can't be solved at micro level, but require the linking of local efforts to wider initiatives targeting more fundamental, global systems change: holding global companies to account for environmental and human rights violations in their supply chains; ending global consumers' unhealthy addiction to low-price fashion, seafood and other goods; and creating a more equitable and sustainable international economic system.

To tackle the global systemic drivers that perpetuate harmful gender discrimination and gender-based exploitation and abuse in every corner of the globe, we need to change the rules of the game to ensure that companies are no longer able to treat slavery in their operations as simply a by-product of doing business.

### Lessons to take forward

- It is important to bring pressure to bear at different levels to achieve systems change. High-level policy engagement should be combined with community mobilisation and bottom-up pressure - for example, through survivor networks and women's and community groups - alongside strategic media outreach to move public opinion.
- Success rates tend to be highest when advocacy drives are highly specific and target-oriented, framed to influence one particular legislative, policy or business decision, with campaign asks and communications directly addressing specific local circumstances.
- Collaboration with government and businesses - offering positive incentives for governments and businesses 'doing the right thing' - can achieve long-term changes in policy and practice. Where businesses fail to address modern slavery, pressure-based strategies such as legal action can be effective tools to shift corporate practices.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It's not by chance that more than two-thirds of victims of trafficking and exploitation worldwide are women and girls. It's an inevitable consequence of the gender inequality that oppresses the lives of women and girls everywhere. Around the world, nearly 30 million women and girls are estimated to be living in conditions of slavery because of the systemic gender discrimination - from lack of opportunity to lack of rights - that makes them more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

Through our work alongside our partners and with the women and girls who are victims, survivors or at ever-present risk of exploitation, we have learned that to make a lasting difference, we need to play our part in building a multi-faceted response that both supports women's empowerment and addresses the deep-rooted gender inequality and discrimination that drives and enables modern slavery.

We need to provide survivors, victims and at-risk women and girls with the information they need to know their rights, understand the risks, and make informed choices. We need to support them to gain the education and livelihood opportunities they need to avoid trafficking and exploitation, and for survivors to avoid re-trafficking and further exploitation. We need to provide the mental health, self-care and confidence-building support that enables women and girls to reclaim their self-worth and agency.

We know that bringing women and girls together in peer groups of the same age, job or background provides a powerful vehicle for their personal growth and a highly effective platform for mobilisation and awareness-raising. We know that supporting women's leadership - and in particular the leadership of women survivors - will help build an anti-slavery movement that is representative of the people it is trying to help, knowledgeable about the risks they face, and determined to change the gender inequalities that underpin discrimination, exploitation and abuse.

But we also know that we should not put all the onus on women and girls themselves for fixing the system that has made them so vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation. Real change requires fundamental shifts in the way communities and societies are treating and valuing women and girls, as well as deep structural changes in the way local and global economies are recruiting, using and remunerating female labour.

Governments everywhere need to step up to ensure women and girls are afforded all necessary protections and given equal access to resources, education, medical care, affordable credit and decent work with equal pay. Businesses all along global supply chains need to take decisive action to eradicate environmental, human rights and gender-based violations from their operations and business models. And civil society partners in the global movement to end modern slavery must continue to act as catalysts of systemic change, drawing on insights into the larger systemic forces and inequities gained from working alongside and in support of women and girls at the sharp end of those discriminatory systems.

This report argues that initiatives to tackle modern slavery that address gender inequality and support women's empowerment can have a long-term impact in reducing and preventing trafficking, exploitation and abuse. Although the sheer scale of the task may seem daunting, we now have a large strategic toolbox available to us to raise awareness, support women and girls, mobilise communities, shift gender stereotypes, and generate pressure on governments, businesses and other stakeholders to take responsibility for changing the systems, policies and practices that perpetuate modern slavery.

The Freedom Fund model of innovative investment in networks of frontline groups working with and for at-risk communities, combined with women's empowerment initiatives and system level advocacy, has already transformed lives and shifted norms in many of our hotspot program locations. We will continue

to improve, share our learning, and work with our partners and funders so that, together, we can break the cycle of gender inequality and women and girls' exploitation, and end the systemic exploitation and abuse of vulnerable people that is modern slavery.

## Key recommendations

**Support women and girls to meet their basic needs**

**Tackle debt bondage**

**Support women and girls into decent work**

**Support safer migration for women and girls**

**Support initiatives to address sexual violence and abuse**

**Support women and girls to have fair and equal access to education**

**Support information-sharing and awareness-raising among women, girls and their communities**

**Work to challenge harmful gender norms and attitudes**

**Support women's leadership - including women survivors' leadership**

**Support women's groups - such as self-help groups, savings and loans groups, and workers' groups**

**Support advocacy initiatives at national and global levels for improved laws and regulations**

**Pursue legal avenues to hold abusers to account for trafficking and exploitation**

**Collaborate with governments to enforce and implement laws and improve policy and practice**

**Collaborate with businesses to end exploitation in workplaces and along supply chains**

**Fund more research into what works to reduce women and girls' vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking**

## Annex: Freedom Fund programs

### ASIA REGION

**Location:** Thailand, Indonesia

**Launched:** 2015 (in Thailand), 2021 (in Indonesia)

**Issue:** Slavery in fishing supply chains in the Asia-Pacific region, affecting predominantly male migrants but also women working in (often informal) seafood processing.

**Program focus:** A newly expanded regional program to promote safer migration for internal and international migrant workers; support worker agency, organising and worker-led monitoring; foster investigative reporting and media pressure; and engage in evidence-driven advocacy to shift national and international government regulations and processes.

### BANGLADESH

**Location:** Dhaka

**Launched:** 2021

**Issue:** Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Dhaka.

**Program focus:** Pilot program to research the causes and scale of CSEC in Dhaka to inform the design of an effective and scalable program; develop a collaborative grassroots and survivor-led model to reduce CSEC prevalence; and establish a new operational presence and collaborative network in the country.

### BRAZIL

**Location:** Metropolitan region of Recife

**Launched:** 2020

**Issue:** Commercial sexual exploitation of children.

**Program focus:** To improve policies to tackle CSEC and coordination among stakeholders to hold the government accountable for their implementation; increase the use of knowledge-based evidence and survivors' voices to inform policies and programmatic responses; provide survivors and vulnerable children with support, information and skills to prevent and safely exit from CSEC; and reduce social acceptance and demand for CSEC.

### EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS

**Location:** UK (pilot)

**Launched:** 2020 (in partnership with Survivor Alliance)

**Issue:** Lack of employment opportunities for survivors in anti-slavery organisations and the non-profit sector.

**Program focus:** To place people with lived experience of slavery and human trafficking into paid positions within anti-slavery organisations, provide skills training and mentorship, and develop a model for both survivor inclusion initiatives and broader diversity and inclusion initiatives.

### ETHIOPIA

**Location:** Addis Ababa and Amhara region (North and South Wollo and Kemisse)

**Launched:** 2015

**Issue:** Trafficking, exploitation and domestic servitude of Ethiopian women migrants to the Middle East and Gulf states and of child domestic workers within Ethiopia.

**Program focus:** Safer migration and child domestic worker program, aiming to reduce the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking to the Middle East and Gulf states for domestic work; improve livelihoods; enable a better understanding of safe migration; and reduce the risk of exploitation of child domestic workers within Ethiopia.

### FREEDOM RISING

**Location:** Global

**Launched:** 2020

**Issue:** Lack of women and survivors in leadership positions in anti-slavery organisations.

**Program focus:** Build a powerful and representative movement led by women and survivors by equipping individuals, through a 12-month program of leadership and technical skills training, with the necessary skills and support to lead more effective organisations, build collective power, and become advocates for gender justice and survivor leadership both within and beyond their organisations.

## **INDIA**

**Location:** Bihar and Uttar Pradesh

**Launched:** 2014

**Program focus:** Third strategy phase from 2020: to support the government to effectively prevent and respond to child labour; enable sustainable freedom through collective action at the community level; strengthen legal action to prevent child labour; and support survivor groups and community leadership.

**Location:** Tamil Nadu

**Launched:** 2015

**Program focus:** Work to promote child protection in textile production areas through: supporting government bodies to promote labour protections; assisting NGOs that work with communities to gain access to government schemes and entitlements; supporting children and adolescents in their education; and working with mill management to offer training and build capacity.

**Location:** Jaipur

**Launched:** 2019

**Program focus:** Work to prevent and eliminate child labour through a united strategy involving collaboration with the state government; working with local NGOs to improve access to education and government entitlements; strengthening livelihood opportunities; and building the capacity of apparel and handicraft businesses.

## **MYANMAR**

**Location:** Border regions in Kachin, Northern Shan and Eastern Shan states

**Launched:** 2020

**Issue:** Trafficking of Myanmar women and girls domestically and into China for forced marriage, forced childbirth, domestic servitude and forced labour.

**Program focus:** Strengthen prevention mechanisms through effective women and girls' empowerment, community organising, and promotion of safer migration; support trafficking survivors to leave situations of exploitation, recover and reintegrate.

## **NEPAL**

**Location:** Provinces 2, 5 and 7

**Launched:** 2014

**Issue:** Traditional systems of agricultural bonded labour known as Harawa-Charawa, Haliya and Kamaiya, affecting marginalised, low-caste ethnic groups in Nepal. Families become trapped in exploitative labour relationships to repay debt which may be passed down through several generations.

**Program focus:** Work to reduce the prevalence of agricultural bonded labour in Nepal and support survivors to achieve sustainable freedom. This will be done through mobilising Harawa-Charawa, Haliya and Kamaiya leaders to form a united survivor-led movement, ensuring the government has a robust legal and policy framework and building the resilience of these communities to bring themselves out of bondage.

*(Note: our program tackling commercial sexual exploitation of children in Kathmandu's adult entertainment sector ran from 2015-20.)*

## **SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP FUND**

**Location:** Global

**Launched:** 2021

**Issue:** Lack of funding and support for survivor-led organisations.

**Program focus:** To uplift and support survivor-led organisations by providing unrestricted grants that organisations can use to build their capacity and improve their impact.

## **WEST AFRICA**

**Location:** Liberia and Nigeria

**Launching:** July 2022

**Issue:** Exploitative child domestic work

**Program focus:** Understanding how to effectively support children in exploitative domestic work and address the factors which push and maintain children in these situations.

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The Freedom Fund is a leader in the global movement to end modern slavery. We identify and invest in the most effective frontline efforts to eradicate modern slavery in the countries and sectors where it is most prevalent. Partnering with visionary investors, governments, anti-slavery organisations and those at risk of exploitation, we tackle the systems that allow slavery to persist and thrive. Working together, we protect vulnerable populations, liberate and reintegrate those enslaved and prosecute those responsible.



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