International Justice Mission is a human rights organisation that secures justice for victims of bonded labour, sexual exploitation and other forms of violence.
To a labourer who has been bonded for months and sometimes years, freedom can be a daunting prospect. After a life of confinement and dependence, labourers suddenly find themselves at the brink of a sea of opportunities with little or no skills to navigate through it, no homes to go back to and very few belongings to call their own. IJM, with the assistance of the District Administration, stands alongside survivors through this trying phase of their lives by training, supporting and guiding them. This photo journal captures various moments of the rehabilitation process as it restores life and dignity to bonded labour survivors.
IJM social workers are present at the rescue, supporting survivors as they pack up their meagre belongings to leave the work site forever. They will continue to support survivors as they return to their homes and villages to build new lives in freedom.
IJM social workers conduct an initial assessment of the emergency health, physical, or emotional needs of each rescued family. This is a time for the social worker to begin building trust with survivors and help them transition back into mainstream society after years in bondage.
At the Revenue Divisional Office, the government conducts an official inquiry to confirm bonded labour. At the end of the inquiry, identified victims are given a “Release Certificate”, declaring their freedom and entitling them to several government benefits, including Rs. 20,000 for rehabilitation. The first Rs. 1,000 is usually given on the day of the rescue, and the remainder of the money is given later.
After survivors have been declared free by local government officials, the IJM team explains to them that their captivity has been illegal. They are told that they are no longer bonded, that they have basic rights as Indian citizens, and that they can finally go back to their own homes to rebuild their lives in freedom.
The Protection Petition is filed at the local police station to notify authorities that rescued bonded labourers have returned to their jurisdiction. It necessitates the police to protect survivors from ongoing harassment by the owner. More importantly, it helps survivors to view the police as 'safe' officials who will protect them. This is a huge step forward, as in the past, victims have been coerced into submission with threats of being handed over to the police for their outstanding loan. Understanding that the law is for and not against them gives survivors new hope, courage and confidence.

Date:

**VIA HAND DELIVERY**

To

The Sub-Inspector Police Station,
Police Station
District

Sir,

Sub: To provide protection for the bonded labourers released.

On the basis of the complaint given by International Justice Mission, The Revenue Divisional Officer, Revenue Division, District, has conducted a raid in and found that

are treated as bonded labourers by the owners of the

and had released them from the above said owners, today

They are released from the bonded labour system and are going to stay in their native village at

Hence, we apprehend that there may be danger and harassment either from the owners, or their henchmen. We would request you to provide them with appropriate protection, enabling the victims to live in their village without any fear.

Thanking You,

Sincerely
Shortly after the rescue, IJM invites survivors to join the two-year rehabilitation programme. The first major event is the Freedom Training—a three-day event during which survivors and their families are educated about their legal rights, the responsibilities that accompany their new-found freedom, their financial responsibilities and the need to access government benefits. Children are given additional training regarding the importance of education, how to stay safe, proper hygiene and so on.

Freedom Training is a time for children to draw, sing, play games, and create crafts – often for the first time ever in their lives. More than two years after attending the Freedom Training, this little girl and her siblings are actively attending school and have big dreams for their future.

Bondage and abuse fracture family dynamics. Freedom Training focuses on rebuilding those relationships through education and games. This photo shows a young couple enjoying a water balloon toss game. Two years post-rescue, they are still a happy family.
Female empowerment is a key topic, not just at Freedom Training, but throughout the rehabilitation programme. The importance of educating daughters, preventing child marriage and respecting women as equal partners and valued community members is highlighted.

Separate sessions are conducted for men and women to discuss gender-specific topics.

Freedom Training is often the first time in years when people get a chance to laugh and play. Group games are used to foster a sense of community that survivors can depend upon.
Home visits are an integral part of IJM’s rehabilitation programme. Every survivor is assigned a social worker, who comes up with a customised rehabilitation plan, taking individual needs into account. These visits are also an opportunity to counsel survivors on specific challenges that they might be facing like addictions or marital conflicts.
Bonded labour survivors from different rescue operations are encouraged to attend the monthly meetings that are held in their district. These meetings are an opportunity for participants to receive information on topics they have requested their social workers to cover, such as cancer education, suicide prevention, family planning and addictions. Monthly meetings are also a time for new participants to find hope by seeing how those freed months and years before them have been succeeding in life.
Helping survivors access government benefits and entitlements are central to IJM's work. IJM helps survivors apply for Ration Cards, Voter Identification Cards, Community Certificates and housing pattas. Social workers also help with the application process and encourage community members to access all the other benefits that they are entitled to.
The site on which this village is built was granted by the government as survivors approached them for help. The houses have been funded by survivors themselves with their rehabilitation money. Survivors have also worked with the government effectively to access clean water and electricity.
Returning to school is extremely challenging for many children rescued from bondage, as most of them have missed years of education or have never attended school. IJM social workers help children find school placements and even advocate with local teachers to ensure they understand the child’s situation. In exceptional cases, adolescents are placed in hostels to ensure they have the unique attention necessary to make up for years of missed schooling.
Years of bondage and excruciating labour often take a toll on survivors’ health. After rescue, there are often a host of medical conditions that need to be dealt with, including heart conditions, prenatal issues, eye conditions, skin diseases, and malnutrition. IJM conducts an initial medical screening with follow-up care being included in the individual rehabilitation plan of every survivor. IJM also coordinates with local hospitals to ensure that survivors attend organised health camps.

This picture shows a woman receiving an eye check-up at an eye-camp.
Bonded labourers are lured by a cash advance due to their financial desperation. Without proper training on budgeting and steady employment options, survivors are vulnerable to taking an advance again should another emergency arise. Thus, IJM’s rehabilitation programme heavily focuses on economic empowerment. Survivors have been introduced to livelihood training and other micro-finance opportunities.

Vasanthi and Sadaiyan were able to start a farm and now have a thriving business selling milk. Financially empowered, they are able to focus on their children’s education. Vasanthi is also raising awareness on the evils of bonded labour among her community by speaking publicly about her experiences as a bonded labourer.
Shanmugam was given a grant to start a business producing bamboo and palm leaf products. Not only has he lifted his family out of poverty, he has also trained and employed a number of other bonded labour survivors.
After completing IJM's two-year rehabilitation programme, participants are invited to a three-day "Graduation" celebration. This is a time to highlight their successes and to reinforce basic education on sustaining their freedom. This is also a time to signal their transition from depending on IJM social workers to being self-reliant.

Almost three years after rescue, these siblings regularly attend school and live in a healthy and happy family.

After completing the rehabilitation programme, these children are full of joy and hope for their future. Their experiences in bondage are now but distant memories!
Kutty, Malliga, and their children are strong examples of how a family can thrive when given the opportunity. They have a strong and respectful family relationship, proper housing, good jobs, financial stability, and the children regularly attend school. They have been such an inspiration that Kutty was elected to be a community leader in 2014.

Men and women celebrate their successes in freedom. Despite all the challenges, they are still free, years after rescue.

Survivors are called to elect community leaders, who will take responsibility for the long-term well-being of all the survivors in their local communities.
Community leaders are elected by other members and accept the responsibility of caring for fellow survivors. IJM encourages these outstanding survivors by honing their conflict management and government advocacy skills. They are also trained to act as bonded labour spokespersons at media and public events.

It is this newly raised generation of leaders who will now take up the fight against bonded labour within their own communities and spheres of influence.