Survivor
Gowri’s journey to freedom
International Justice Mission is a human rights organisation that secures justice for victims of bonded labour, sexual exploitation and other forms of violence.
Rescued from the Armugam Woodcutting Unit in the year 2010, Gowri has emerged as a leader among her community members, advocating against domestic violence, caste-based oppression and bonded labour. She is also a skilled and forthright public speaker who shares her own story of oppression candidly.

An inspiration to her community, Gowri’s life bears testimony to the power of equipping released bonded labourers with the knowledge of their rights and freedoms.

This photo journal celebrates Gowri and countless others like her, who stand tall, amidst and in spite of the challenges that confront them.
Gowri’s bold testimony resulted in a rescue operation that saved two bonded families. Unfortunately however, they did not receive their Release Certificates as the official leading the rescue argued they were not being held captive at one place.

Gowri first came to the notice of field workers when they heard from other community members of a woman at a woodcutting unit who had suffered immense violence at the hands of her owner. Soon after her third pregnancy, she had come across the owner mercilessly beating up her two-year old who had accidentally broken a tap. When she tried to intervene, she was kicked in her stomach until her sutures gave way. For the next several days, Gowri couldn’t work or even sit without crying in pain. She lay on the floor of her hut vomiting continuously, only able to digest liquids.
Freedom came with a host of challenges. To this day, Gowri lives in a tiny little hut with hardly enough room to accommodate her, let alone a family of four. There is just enough space for her to sleep and store her belongings—two to three saris and a few knick-knacks.
“After her husband’s death, Gowri who had lived under her husband’s shadow suddenly began to take charge of her life,” recalls Helen Barnabas, her aftercare social worker. “With every challenge thrown her way, Gowri always manages to fight back harder. That’s what makes her a survivor.”

Two years into her freedom, Gowri lost her husband to alcoholism. “It was a habit that grew into a disease while working as a bonded labourer,” she says. “After severe abuse at the hands of the owner, he would use any money he had to drink heavily and sleep. He struggled to overcome the habit after our rescue,” she says “but by then, his health had deteriorated.”
The children — Kamatchi, Revathi and Dena also rescued from the unit — have had sporadic success with their education.

Kamatchi, the oldest girl, had to drop out because she was too far behind her peers and could not catch up.

“...The older girls have lost out on key years of their education and find it hard to catch up. They need individual and specialised attention, but unfortunately, the schools they go to are unable to provide them with that. Gowri, as the sole earning member, cannot afford to send them to schools with a better teacher-student ratio.”

– Helen Barnabas
Aftercare Manager

Revathi, the second girl stays at a girls’ hostel. “I don’t like school,” she confesses. “I am so much older and bigger to the girls in my class and I feel quite bad about that.”

Dena, the youngest, stays at a boys’ hostel. He too struggles with his studies, but dreams of becoming a cop!
Her challenges notwithstanding, Gowri takes pleasure in the simple things of life. She takes pride in the vegetable patch that she has been able to grow just outside her house. Every morning, she carefully selects the 'kolam' design that she will adorn her porch with.

Another favourite pastime is playing with her four cats. "After years of bondage, bonded labourers often lose their grip on common familial emotions," says Loretta. "It is common to find parents and children who are completely unattached to each other. The fact that Gowri has pets shows how far she has progressed emotionally."

"Creating things they can call their own give survivors a sense of dignity, self-worth, confidence and control. After years of having every movement of theirs being dictated to them, they can find these simple decisions overwhelming at first, but as they make these simple decisions, they begin to feel empowered."

– Loretta Jhona
Director of Aftercare
During her down time, she also makes coasters, a skill that she picked up as a result of attending a workshop during IJM’s two-year rehabilitative programme.

Livelihood is always a challenge for released labourers, but Gowri, like many others released from bonded labour take on several roles to make ends meet. During summer, she works at a jasmine picking unit. When the season ends, she goes back to her old job—making charcoal. This time however, she makes it of her own volition.
This picture of her erstwhile owner's house, taken from the door of Gowri's hut, is yet another reminder of her courage. Literally a stone's throw away from her own house, Gowri had to pass the owner's house every day to get to her own home.

“Every time he saw me, he would threaten me with dire consequences. When he saw me heading out, he would tell me he was going to burn up my house. Since I did not receive the Release Certificate, I was always afraid that the law would not be on my side.”

The Release Certificate also enabled Gowri to apply for Aadhar cards for both her oldest daughter and herself. “To be formally and legally recognised as a citizen means a lot to me. Though I still have a lot of troubles, I feel more confident now. I am thankful to the official who stepped in and conducted a re-enquiry for us.”

Five years after her release though, on the basis of a re-enquiry, Gowri and the other family rescued with her received their Release Certificates.

“Since the day I received my Release Certificate, the owner does not trouble me anymore,” says Gowri.
Says Rani, a community member, “My husband was an alcoholic and he would physically abuse me. Gowri helped get him into rehab and she provided me with a place to stay.”

Meena, yet another community member, talks of how her only child was saved because of Gowri’s timely intervention. “I have lost a child. With my son, I had a complicated pregnancy and my village did not have the right facilities. Gowri recognised that my case was critical and on her own initiative booked an ambulance and brought me to Chennai.”

Today, the family continues to share a close bond.

Gowri also enjoys spending time with her friends from the village, many of whom look to her for support and help. Fully conscious of her rights as an Indian citizen and the dignity due to her as an individual, Gowri encourages other women in her community to speak up for themselves.
Besides being a promising community leader, Gowri is also a fiery speaker who inspires other community members to stand up for their rights. “Gowri seizes every opportunity to share her own story of violence and freedom. She is passionate about spreading awareness and bringing the inhuman practice of bonded labour to an end,” says Loretta.
The sickle, the most commonly used tool in woodcutting, lies outside Gowri’s home — a symbol of the past she has left behind, a past that continues to influence her life in so many ways.

However, it is also a symbol of hope and an indication of how one struggling family of bonded labour victims have moved on, refusing to let their painful memories dictate the rest of their lives.