



FREEDOM RISING

A transformative leadership program for a
diverse and powerful anti-slavery movement

Achievements July 2021 to July 2024

I realised that I need to have a support network as a leader. I remembered that when I'm alone it's difficult to move forward, unlike when I'm with someone else... I'm thinking about how I'm going to apply all of this in my organisation, how to replicate what we experience here.

Brazil participant



Front cover image: Participants from the Nepal cohort of Freedom Rising © Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund

Participants from the South India cohort of Freedom Rising © Natália Corrêa/The Freedom Fund

Vision: A strong and inclusive anti-slavery movement that is led by those most affected and which challenges norms and drives systemic change needed to end modern slavery

The Freedom Rising program is a unique and transformative program that seeks to end modern slavery by supporting the leadership of those who are most affected. This global program was launched in late 2020 and has since been delivered in India, Brazil and Nepal, reaching 241 grassroots leaders in communities that experience high levels of exploitation. The program has deliberately sought to uplift and support leaders who suffer discrimination and exclusion, with 75% of participants being women, and 42% themselves having suffered exploitation. As a result of the program, participants have not only increased their leadership capacity and connections with other leaders, but are also bringing about change within their organisations and networks to create stronger and more inclusive movements to end slavery.

Contemplating this collective dream, and also listening to other people's dreams and stories, made me reflect on how we can evolve as a movement, never forgetting to take care of those on the frontlines. I'm bringing the practices of each residential to my team, so that we all share what I have been learning.

Brazil participant



Participant at a Freedom Rising residential in Brazil.

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APPROACH



Movements that are led by people who are most affected by injustice create the deepest and most sustained change. Ending slavery therefore requires investment in the leadership of individuals and communities who are most affected by exploitation.

Freedom Rising is a transformative leadership program that supports and connects frontline leaders – especially women and survivors – to grow their leadership of anti-slavery movements. The program aims to grow a strong and inclusive anti-slavery movement that is led by those most affected and which challenges norms and drives systemic change needed to end modern slavery.

Over the course of a year, cohorts of up to 50 leaders come together in a series of residential modules to develop their leadership skills, resilience and relationships. The program employs feminist and participatory methodologies, through which participants reflect, analyse and act on the program's key themes of power, gender, trauma and resilience.

Freedom Rising is unique in its support for diverse and emerging leadership, as well as its explicit focus on building stronger and more representative anti-slavery movements. The program is grounded in local context and is delivered in local language alongside an in-country partner and local facilitators in each location.

Values of equity and inclusion infuse all elements of the program, to ensure that it is not only accessible to participants from marginalised groups but actively promotes their meaningful inclusion and participation. The program employs methodologies that cater to diversity of backgrounds, literacy and education levels. The program also provides logistical and psychological support to participants through an onsite team and counsellor, and provides financial support in the form of stipends.

Freedom Rising program structure

	Residential 1	Residential 2	Residential 3	Residential 4
	Transforming Self	Transforming Relationships	Transforming Organisations	Transforming Movements
Shared learning	Understanding transformative leadership	Approaches to leading others	Examining organisational culture and leadership	Strategies of successful movements
Reflecting and analysing	My leadership journey	Interpersonal relationship skill building	Analysing organisations and planning for change	My role in movement building
Power, gender and identity	Power and identity	Analysing power, norms, and managing conflict	Power and deep culture in organisations	Mapping power and opportunities
Trauma and resilience	Self-care	Trauma-informed leadership	Trauma-informed and resilient organisations	Resource sharing and collective action for resilience
Visioning and action planning	Personal visioning and action planning	Collective visioning and dream-building for my organisation	Organisational visioning and action planning	Alumni Network visioning and action planning

GOALS



Freedom Rising participants from the North India cohort
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OUR REACH



241 leaders from India, Brazil, Nepal



75% women



42% survivors

BRAZIL



91 participants from two cohorts



85% women



65% survivors

The program expanded and launched in Brazil in early 2023, completing a cohort with leaders from the north-east in and around Recife and launching a new cohort in Sao Paulo to complete in 2024.

NEPAL



50 participants from one cohort



82% women



44% survivors

In late 2023 the program expanded to Nepal with an inaugural cohort of leaders from Kathmandu Valley.

INDIA



100 participants from two cohorts



62% women



20% survivors

The Freedom Rising program was piloted in India starting in late 2020 with two cohorts of leaders, one in the northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and one in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

Usha

Usha works with a grassroots organisation in Tamil Nadu, South India. When she was first invited to the Freedom Rising program she had never before travelled without her father or husband. At first, she felt afraid to speak in the program sessions and felt intimidated by more senior leaders in the room, but the program facilitators encouraged her to speak, and listened to her opinions. She says:

“It created space for me to share my experiences. When my fellow leaders ask me, ‘Usha – what do you think? Can you share your opinions?’, I felt good. This is the first space where my opinions are valued and people listen to my comments. When my points were listed on the flipcharts, I felt so happy and proud. When my chart paper was hung along with other leaders, I felt huge confidence in myself. During the break, I used to walk around the hall and look at my flipcharts. There is no space for women like me to share my opinions and those opinions are never valued. I took photographs of those flipcharts and showed them to my children.”

Usha says the program made her and her director think differently about their organisation. They discussed with their board about bringing women leaders into the organisation and revising the organisation’s policies to make them more inclusive and gender-sensitive. Usha also conducted a dream-building exercise with board members to develop a shared organisational vision – and following her completion of the program, Usha was invited to join the board of her organisation.

“I realised the leader in me. Travelling alone for the first time, staying alone for the first time, eating in the big restaurant, sharing my space with my fellow leaders impacted deeply inside me and I realised the new woman and leader in me.”

Usha taking part in the Freedom Rising workshop in Lumbini, Nepal.

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IMPACTS AND INSIGHTS

Individual changes

The Freedom Rising program strongly believes in the leadership capacity of all individuals, and focuses on developing 'soft' leadership skills such as self-awareness, reflection, power analysis and collaboration, to support the emergence of effective, equitable and empathic leaders.

Strengthened confidence

Through the program participants have built their skills in visioning, developing action plans, and conflict management, while also deepening their understanding of concepts of power, community ownership, and lived experience.

In India, women leaders in particular reported a significant increase in their level of comfort with these key leadership skills. Data from the South India cohort shows that at the beginning of the program women leaders reported being significantly less comfortable with action planning than male participants, while by the end of the program their comfort levels were as high as males on this skill, and higher than men in relation to skills such as conflict management and facilitating group reflection.

Following the first Brazil cohort, 92% of participants were more confident using active listening techniques, 79% were more confident understanding or developing funding strategies, and 87% were more confident facilitating a group discussion to create a shared vision.

Participating in this training brought my confidence back. Now I realise I am here, to live, rejoice in my successes and failures, learn, and move forward identifying my strengths. I realised how taking care of myself is crucial for a leader like us.

Nepal participant



Images, top to bottom: participant from the Freedom Rising cohort in Nepal © Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund; participant from the Freedom Rising cohort in South India © JDOT Films/The Freedom Fund; participants from the Freedom Rising cohort in Brazil © Nando Chiappetta/The Freedom Fund

Importance of self-care

I was very careless about my own care [and] used to work the whole night, drinking and smoking, as we are involved in the night entertainment sector. But now I realise that was not good. Now I am taking care of myself and also sharing with my friends and community. It's been like a self-awakening to me.

Nepal participant

Social justice organisations and movements often rely on the dedication of singular leaders, with negative consequences for the health and sustainability of both the leaders and their organisations. The Freedom Rising program has heard from leaders about the need to develop spaces and strategies to practise self-care and mutual care. This need has been especially important for participants with lived experiences of various and multiple forms of trauma.

Participants across cohorts have noted a change in the perception, understanding and implementation of self-care practices. Many leaders come to the program with a deep sense of both mental and physical exhaustion from years of working in the community and caring for others. Some shared openly that they neglected their own health and needs, not prioritising themselves. Many also carried the heavy burden of the collective trauma of their communities and their own lives.

The idea of taking care of yourself had a profound impact on participants and they began to share and integrate self-care practices within their teams and organisations.

Participants have also implemented collective care strategies, including regular health and well-being checks for staff and volunteers, reduced working hours, providing counsellors for staff, and monthly yoga and meditation sessions.

In each of the cohorts in Brazil, Nepal and South India, regular self-care practices (such as meditation, exercise, taking work breaks, art and music therapy) were adopted by over 88% of the participants.

Recognition of power

What came to me was an awareness of this power structure. Until I joined the program, I didn't see myself as a leader, but here my awareness of this has grown. The idea that leadership is a natural thing no longer fits in my head. Leadership is a construct!

Brazil participant

Leaders have reported fundamental changes in the way they think about their own and others' leadership, particularly the leadership of women and survivors. Participants have come to recognise the power structures in their organisations and also the power they have as leaders. In India, discussions on bias in gender, caste and religion have led a number of leaders towards significant shifts in attitude and perception, and consequential shifts in the way they engage with their families, colleagues and communities. In all cohorts there was a profound recognition by many participants about their own power and many saw themselves for the first time as a leader.

Freedom Rising made me realise that leadership in me. Leadership is not about skills and positions. It's about passion, commitment and experiences. Anyone can be a leader. The change should start from within.

India participant

The program is also encouraging leaders to reflect on power within their organisations, with 80% of participants in Nepal having identified aspects of power within their organisation that they would seek to change. Participants in all locations are already making changes to shift power, including changing the way that discussions and decisions are conducted within their organisations and communities.

The 'walk of power' exercise made me reflect a lot on my place of listening, asking myself: 'well, are we really trying to make a difference in our institutions, or have we been repeating what the system does to us?' We need to make a difference.

Brazil participant

Participants take part in a recap and self-care rituals activity in Nepal.
© Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund



Paulo

Paulo França is 49 years old and has lived all his life on the largest sea island in Brazil. Paulo is from an indigenous community and one of the 12 children of his family. He started to work in the fields at 8 year old with his father, harvesting cocoa in one of the big farms in the State of Bahia. *"I had to,"* he said. *"It was the only way to eat."* Paulo was enslaved on cocoa plantations for decades before eventually being rescued.

Supported by a local group, Paulo and 12 other rescued workers set up a collective of survivors called VidaCacau. *"Everyone got a function and I was named as president"* Paulo was one of the 50 leaders selected by The Freedom Fund to participate in the Freedom Rising Program in Brazil. At first, Paulo felt overwhelmed, but he listened and observed the other participants. When he returned from the first residential, he invited his colleagues to experience a dream building activity he had learned about in the program.

"I learnt that we have to work together. It's not just because I'm the president that I have to do it all alone. And that's how we're doing it now: when there's a disagreement, we all get together and talk. It was the same with the dream, we made the dream activity together and dreamed of remodeling some people's houses and building houses for others. We set up a project and we've already got the materials to renovate some houses."

During the third residential, Paulo celebrated new achievements— VidaCacau became fully formalized and the survivor collective bought a piece of land to be shared and cultivated together. Paulo is committed to not only continuing to build his leadership but to build the leadership of others in his community.

"We cannot have just one person in charge. We have to renew every two years and others need to also experience leadership as I have, right? We recently held a meeting with a set of organizations, including government representatives. Everyone should be able to speak and to facilitate collective ideas. We're learning to reach consensus. My role today is to encourage them and to join the fight against oppression."

Paulo during the Freedom Rising residential in Brazil
© Nando Chiappetta/The Freedom Fund



Organisational changes

Shifting internal policies, structures and norms

Frontline organisations are central pillars in the struggle against modern slavery in every part of the world. Yet within these organisations leadership dynamics often replicate problematic power structures – many continue to be led by those who founded them (typically from dominant communities), and most do not have a way of supporting emerging leadership and sharing power.

Within months of finishing the program 68% of participating organisations in South India had already taken action to promote the perspectives and leadership of women, including changing organisational policies, promoting women into leadership roles, and reviewing their Board composition.

As part of the program, participants work with their colleagues to analyse and identify changes required in their organisations to better align with their organisational vision and values, and to develop organisational action plans to carry out these changes.

The sessions on succession planning and gender disturbed me a lot. I kept thinking about them... The way [my colleague participating in Freedom Rising] conducted a dream-building session, I realised she can be the next director. I felt guilty about why I was searching for gold outside when I already have a diamond with me. I had long been thinking about handing over the reins of my organisation and after [the program], I finally did.

India participant

Across locations, participating organisations reported important structural, policy, and operational changes as a result of the program. To date these have included:

- changing hiring and promotion practices to be more inclusive of women, survivors, and people from other marginalised backgrounds
- promoting survivor leaders within the organisation or onto the Board of Trustees
- succession planning and strengthening second-line women's leadership
- training in gender, inclusion, and trauma-informed approaches
- development of policies including safeguarding, gender, maternal, non-discrimination and mandatory leave.



Image: Freedom Rising participants from the North India cohort.

© JDot Films/The Freedom Fund

Shifting internal and external relationships

Crucially, many leaders are also reporting changes in their relationships within and outside their organisations, including the way that they work with and engage with communities.

In North India more than half of the participating organisations reported changes to improve inclusion and relationships in their organisation, including, for example, engaging community members in strategic and decision-making processes.

In Brazil 92% of participants reported improvements in their relationships with others in their organisations, and 87% reported improved relationships with others in their network.

After [the third residential], we conducted organisation vision-building exercises with children. We have been working with children for many years, but we never brought them into the planning process.

It was a huge realisation for us that the community has to be involved in the process. We should not just look at them as beneficiaries, they are equal stakeholders. As a director, I realised that I was holding so much power within me and within the organisation. During the dream-building exercise, I said: 'I am not the director, we are going to think for our organisation.'

India participant



MOVEMENT-LEVEL CHANGES

The foundation of an effective movement is relationships of trust, mutual support and collaboration between movement leaders, their organisations and their communities. As a result of the program, Freedom Rising participants and their organisations are increasing and deepening their connections, and importantly are sharing resources to strengthen their collective capacity. In some instances this has involved strengthening bonds that already existed and generating new ideas for collaboration amongst groups already known to each other, while in other cases it has involved forging new connections with groups that don't typically interact.

Strengthened and diversified connections

Collaboration between participant organisations has included offering placements on courses, carrying out joint training, providing support to help an organisation formalise and register, collaborating on public campaigns, and joint participation in public policy-making spaces.

In Brazil 92% of participants reported having built new connections with other leaders and 67% of participants have collaborated with another organisation or leaders as a result of the program.

In India, organisations have continued to support each other to develop organisational structures and policies, and to access networks and funding. Participant organisations are sharing information on funding opportunities, training each other on fundraising processes, and supporting each other to successfully access new funding. These activities are particularly powerful given the scarcity of funding and the competition that usually exists between organisations in accessing funding in this sector.

In Nepal 84% of Freedom Rising participants have collaborated with another organisation or other leaders as a result of the program.

We were thinking financial resources are the only way of achieving sustainability. The myth is broken, there are many ways to build strong and sustainable organisations. We are happy to share our resources with other organisations. Freedom Rising taught me resources are not just funds. There are human resources, knowledge resources, values resources, and now I share my knowledge resources with other organisations.

India participant



Sharing learnings

All Freedom Rising participants have shared learning or practices from the program with colleagues, family or community.

Sharing has included a participant using appreciative listening in conversations with their spouse in order to deepen their relationship; a participant leading a group dream-building activity in their organisation to develop a shared vision and strategic plan; and a participant developing and running a leadership training program for rural youth using exercises and examples from the Freedom Rising program. This indicates the reach of Freedom Rising beyond the individual participants and their organisations, and into their communities and networks.

In Brazil 59% of participants shared learning with their immediate team, 54% shared with their entire organisation, 31% shared with peer organisations and 18% shared with their wider network.

Freedom Rising participants from the Nepal cohort.
© Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund



Hiramoti

Hiramoti works with Freed Kamlari Development Forum (FKDF) a grassroots organisation in Nepal that is focused on rescuing and supporting girls in indentured servitude under the Kamlari system. Hiramoti herself is a survivor of the Kamlari system—a traditional form of bonded labour predominant in Nepal.

When she started the Freedom Rising program Hiramoti said she found it hard to open-up and talk to people. Because of her past trauma she felt isolated and closed off. She shared,

“ I grew up in an environment where women are characterized as ‘shy’ and they should not open up and not talk to men. These were the principles at my house that also impacted me. We also had the mind set that women were less capable. ”

After participating in program she reflected on the strength and confidence that she has gained. Hiramoti shared,

“ This is the first program I have attended so far that has touched me. This program has helped me to change my perspective on how powerful everyone could be. How those excluded groups could also be the drivers of change. It has made me realize that we need to create an environment to learn, share, and speak up, recognizing their value and power. ”

Hiramoti during a Freedom Rising residential in Nepal
© Filmatory Nepal/
The Freedom Fund

Hiramoti found the content around self-care to be especially impactful and has started practicing it. She has also started to reflect on her own leadership,

“ I believed that I need to do the work myself. I was reluctant to share the workload with others. I thought that they might not do it well and the quality could be hampered. But now, I can trust people. I started believing in shared power and responsibility. As I have started work delegation, I have more time for self-care and this has helped in relieving my work stress. ”

Hiramoti's organisation is now adopting some of the practices and methodologies from the program such as active and reflective listening and collective dream building. She says this has built a more open environment and greater trust among staff and the board.

Hiramoti is also working with her organisation to bring more survivors of Kamlari into leadership positions and has started capacity building initiatives to support this. They are also developing plans for more collaboration among other marginalised groups in Nepal for a more unified movement.



CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

In 2024 a new Freedom Rising cohort was launched in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and the first cohort in Nepal completed. The alumni group formed by the first cohort in Brazil also took shape, with a coordinating group forming and making plans for ongoing learning and collaboration within the group.

Participants and alumni in all cohorts continue to shape the program, providing regular feedback on all elements of the program and curriculum and shaping the way the program measures and shares impact. Feedback is sought through multiple channels, including 'world café' and 'after-experience reflection' sessions at residencies, anonymous feedback forms, and independent exit interviews. Learning and impact data is also gathered from each cohort throughout and after the program, using a range of tools including impact-sharing and 'most significant change' sessions, exit forms, and interviews. All learning, impact and feedback data is analysed and discussed together with local facilitators and implementing partners, and has informed the evolution of both the program curriculum and structure in each location.

As the program continues to deliver new cohorts in new locations, Freedom Rising will itself evolve as an organic and participant-led program. Future plans for the program include expanding to locations in Africa and South-East Asia, diversifying the programmatic offering to include online and hybrid elements, and supporting local ownership of the program through training of alumni as local facilitators. Over time, it is expected that the alumni will take increasing ownership of the program, and ensure the continued reach and relevance of the program to new leaders and their communities.

Freedom Rising participant from the Nepal cohort
© Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund



VISION

Our vision is a world
free of slavery.

MISSION

Our mission is to mobilise the
knowledge, capital and will need-
ed to end slavery.

The Freedom Fund (UK)

Lower Ground
Caledonia House
223 Pentonville Rd
London, N1 9NG
+44 20 3777 2200

The Freedom Fund (US)

315 Flatbush Avenue
#406
Brooklyn, NY 11217
USA
+1 929 224 2448

 www.freedomfund.org

 info@freedomfund.org

 [@Freedom_Fund](https://twitter.com/Freedom_Fund)

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