

RISING TO LEAD

Transforming leadership to build stronger and inclusive voices in the fight against modern slavery

An evaluation of the Freedom Rising program

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Prepared for the Freedom Fund by
Carol Miller and Aayushi Aggarwal,
Gender at Work



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We, the authors of this report, are external consultants from Gender at Work who were commissioned by the Freedom Fund to evaluate the Freedom Rising program. Gender at Work is an international feminist knowledge network that works to end discrimination against women and build cultures of inclusion. The evaluation team was made up of Aayushi Aggarwal, Carol Miller, Jaya Luintel, Márcia Larangeira Jácome, Solange Rocha, Taranga Siraman and Thais Tiriba.

We join the evaluation team in expressing gratitude to all those who shared their experiences and insights on the Freedom Rising program. To the Freedom Rising alumni and movement leaders in Brazil, India and Nepal, we greatly appreciate the time you gave us in interviews and validation workshops. We have been inspired and touched by your openness and generosity in recounting your stories and struggles to combat modern forms of slavery.

Our thanks also to the Freedom Rising team – Colleen Boselli, Gomathi Palanikumar, Janaina Jatoba, Neeta Minz – and implementing partners Designathon and Instituto Fonte para Desenvolvimento Social for your guidance and support during the course of the evaluation. Special thanks go to Claire Falconer and Varsha Gyawali from the Freedom Fund for their leadership in navigating the evaluation process from start to finish with integrity and passion. We also thank members of the language interpretation teams who supported the validation workshops, our editor, Maureen Hollingsworth and our graphic designer, Naadira Patel.

Please note that the views expressed in this report are solely our interpretations, which are based on our examination of the evidence. We do not claim to directly represent the views of participants in this review.

Finally, we wish to note that, as a team, we have participated in numerous evaluation processes and we all agree that we have rarely been as deeply moved by the change stories shared and the evidence of impact.

Carol Miller
Aayushi Aggarwal

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Freedom Rising program, developed by the Freedom Fund, aimed to build an inclusive and resilient anti-slavery movement by equipping frontline leaders – especially women, survivors and individuals from marginalised communities – with transformative leadership skills.¹ At its heart, transformative leadership is a participatory process of creative collaboration and transformation seeking to reshape existing power dynamics that perpetuate inequalities.²

This external evaluation, conducted by Gender at Work, assessed the program's effectiveness, its contribution to leadership development and the sustainability of its outcomes across Brazil, India and Nepal. The experience of Freedom Rising provides insights relevant to funders and leadership program implementers seeking to foster transformative leadership in organisations and movements. The evaluation, conducted from June to December 2024, used a mixed methods approach, including 130 key informant interviews with program alumni, colleagues, movement leaders, implementing partners and Freedom Fund staff.

Findings indicate that Freedom Rising fostered significant individual-level transformations, enhancing participants' self-awareness, confidence and leadership capabilities. Many alumni reported newfound agency, healing from trauma and a shift towards more inclusive, participatory leadership practices. At the organisational level, Freedom Rising influenced structural and cultural shifts, including the adoption of collaborative leadership models, enhanced strategic planning and the integration of trauma-informed and self-care approaches. Alumni reported that their organisations implemented more inclusive hiring practices, developed safeguarding mechanisms and created safer, more equitable work environments. At the movement level, while large-scale systemic shifts take time, Freedom Rising successfully nurtured cross-organisational solidarity, deeper trust among leaders and initial steps towards joint advocacy efforts. Alumni enhanced their understanding of their role within the anti-slavery movement, fostering new and strengthened collaborations.

The findings indicate that while the program contributed to significant individual and organisational-level changes, the sustained engagement and support after participation and the program's ability to ensure long-term impact beyond its conclusion remain challenging.

The report notes that the extent to which organisations and the broader anti-slavery movement successfully shift power toward lived-experience leadership remains an ongoing process. The recommendation to deepen hotspots as spaces for dialogue, voice and inclusion points to an area where more effort could enhance the impact on fostering inclusive environments.

Key lessons include the importance of trauma-informed, peer-to-peer learning approaches and flexible program adaptation to local contexts, as well as the need for sustained support to leadership cohorts. The evaluation offers the following recommendations for anyone implementing or thinking about transformative leadership in the human rights and anti-slavery sectors.

1. As described in the abstract to their chapter "Transformative Leadership" in the *Handbook of Personal and Organisational Transformation*, Alfonso Montuori and Gabrielle Donnelly write: "transformative leadership is based on the premise that everyone can lead, and that everybody contributes to, and in fact co-creates the world we live in, whether conscious of their agency or not. Every choice, every action, every discussion, every interaction reflects how we are leading our own lives. Transformative leadership invites everybody to ask what kind of world they are creating through their thoughts, beliefs, actions and interactions. Transformative leadership is, at its heart, a participatory process of creative collaboration and transformation for mutual benefit." Montuori, A., Donnelly, G. (2017). Transformative Leadership. In: Neal, J. (eds) *Handbook of Personal and Organizational Transformation*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29587-9_59-1.

2. Oxfam (2017). *Transformative Leadership for Women's Rights*. Oxfam Global Program Framework. Available at: <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621296/rr-transformative-leadership-womens-rights-010117-en.pdf;jsessionid=9394C9656C7E176F0130E14E422A026D?sequence=1>.

1. **Embed the most powerful elements of the Freedom Rising approach into future leadership programs.** This includes trauma-informed and inclusive design, a focus on self-care, peer-to-peer and experiential learning and creating safe spaces to build relationships and confront power dynamics and intersecting forms of oppression.
2. **Strengthen leadership development through complementary organisational support.** Consider adding core, regular funding to give participants and their organisations the stability to embed new strategies, build on program momentum and drive lasting change.
3. **Extend beyond workshops to build ongoing connections and support.** Follow-up mechanisms such as mentorship, peer networks and knowledge-sharing platforms can reinforce learning and foster continued collaboration among participants.
4. **Support movement-building as a key pillar of transformative leadership.** This could include funding for partner exchanges, joint advocacy campaigns and participation in national and global events to strengthen their role in – and influence on – broader ecosystems.
5. **Advocate for more flexible and long-term funding to drive transformative systems change that supports** organisational and movement leaders to build resilience, independence and sustainability over time.

Overall, the Freedom Rising program has made considerable progress along its theory of change, achieving significant individual and organisational-level outcomes. This includes deepened leadership practices, strengthened relationships and cultural shifts within organisations. While direct movement-level impact was limited, partners developed a deeper sense of solidarity, laying a foundation for long-term movement building. The program's unique approach, rooted in feminist principles, fostered inclusive, trauma-informed leadership and offers a valuable model for transformative leadership development processes in the future.

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Image: Final residential for the Freedom Rising cohort in Brazil in 2024.
Credit: Flora Negri/The Freedom Fund

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

In mid-2024, the Freedom Fund commissioned an external evaluation to assess the Freedom Rising program's effectiveness in meeting its envisioned outcomes, as well as the aspects of the program design that contributed to the achievement of those outcomes and their likely sustainability.

This evaluation provides an overall assessment of and recommendations on which components of Freedom Rising should be integrated into ongoing and future leadership programs of the Freedom Fund.

More broadly, we hope the findings would also be useful to other organisations considering a transformative leadership program in the human rights and anti-slavery sectors.

OVERVIEW OF THE FREEDOM RISING PROGRAM

TOTAL



239 PARTICIPANTS



75% WOMEN



44% SURVIVORS



BRAZIL



89 PARTICIPANTS IN
2 COHORTS



87% WOMEN



66% SURVIVORS

A dark blue map of South Asia. Nepal is highlighted in yellow, and India is highlighted in pink. Three colored oval icons (yellow, pink, and teal) are positioned to the left of the Nepal text. Two white lines originate from the text blocks: one from the Nepal section pointing to the Nepal icon, and another from the India section pointing to the India icon.

NEPAL

50 PARTICIPANTS
IN 1 COHORT

82% WOMEN

44% SURVIVORS

INDIA

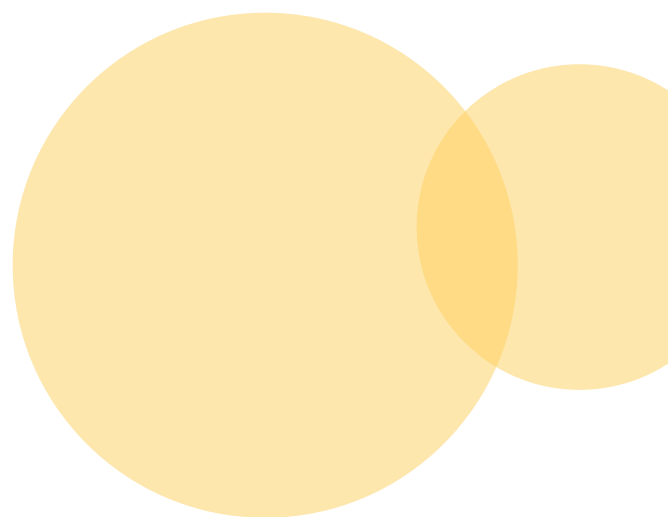
100
PARTICIPANTS IN
2 COHORTS

62% WOMEN

20% SURVIVORS

The Freedom Rising program, developed by the Freedom Fund, was a leadership initiative that aimed to build an inclusive anti-slavery movement. The program's approach was based on the notion that "for widespread societal change, there is a need for transformative leadership that inspires, motivates and collectivises leaders and their communities towards collaborative action to address the systems that enable exploitation" (Freedom Rising Program Guide). The program focused on supporting frontline leaders, especially women, survivors and individuals from marginalised groups who work within vulnerable communities affected by slavery to address systemic exploitation. The initiative emerged from research conducted between 2018 and 2020 across various hotspots – including Brazil, Ethiopia, India, Nepal and Thailand – that highlighted key gaps in leadership development such as limited opportunities for reflection, collaboration and access to leadership spaces for marginalised groups.

In response, Freedom Rising emphasised transformative leadership, focusing on self-awareness, resilience, equity and collaboration. It operated across four domains of change – self, relationships, organisations and movements – fostering systemic change through participatory and reflective learning. The Freedom Rising program's theory of change envisioned impact at three levels: the individual leader, their organisation and the larger anti-slavery movement. Implemented across Brazil, India and Nepal, the program structure included four intensive residential training modules (referred to in this report as "Global Curriculum Residential Four" or "residentials") engaging cohorts of up to 50 leaders over ten to 12 months, combined with inter-residential check-ins and ongoing action plans, to develop their leadership skills, resilience and relationships. The program employed feminist and participatory methodologies, through which participants reflected, analysed and acted on the program's key themes of power, gender, trauma and resilience. The sessions covered key themes such as gender, survivor leadership, power dynamics and resilience, aiming to create sustainable and systemic change at the individual, organisational and movement levels. Throughout, Freedom Rising followed what it described as a movement-building³ process, exploring elements of systems change, starting with the self and building to collective action.⁴



3. Freedom Rising – Global Curriculum Residential Four used this definition: "Movement building is how ... those with shared experience - survivors and communities - organise, build collective power, shared leadership, shared dreams and plans for action. It is defined as: the effort to build and amplify the collective power of (women and other) marginalised people." Adapted from JASS (2013), Feminist Movement Builders Dictionary. Available from: <https://justassociates.org/all-resources/feminist-movement-builders-dictionary/>.

4. More information on Freedom Rising can be found at: <https://www.freedomfund.org/work/movement-building/freedom-rising>.

METHODOLOGY OF EVALUATION

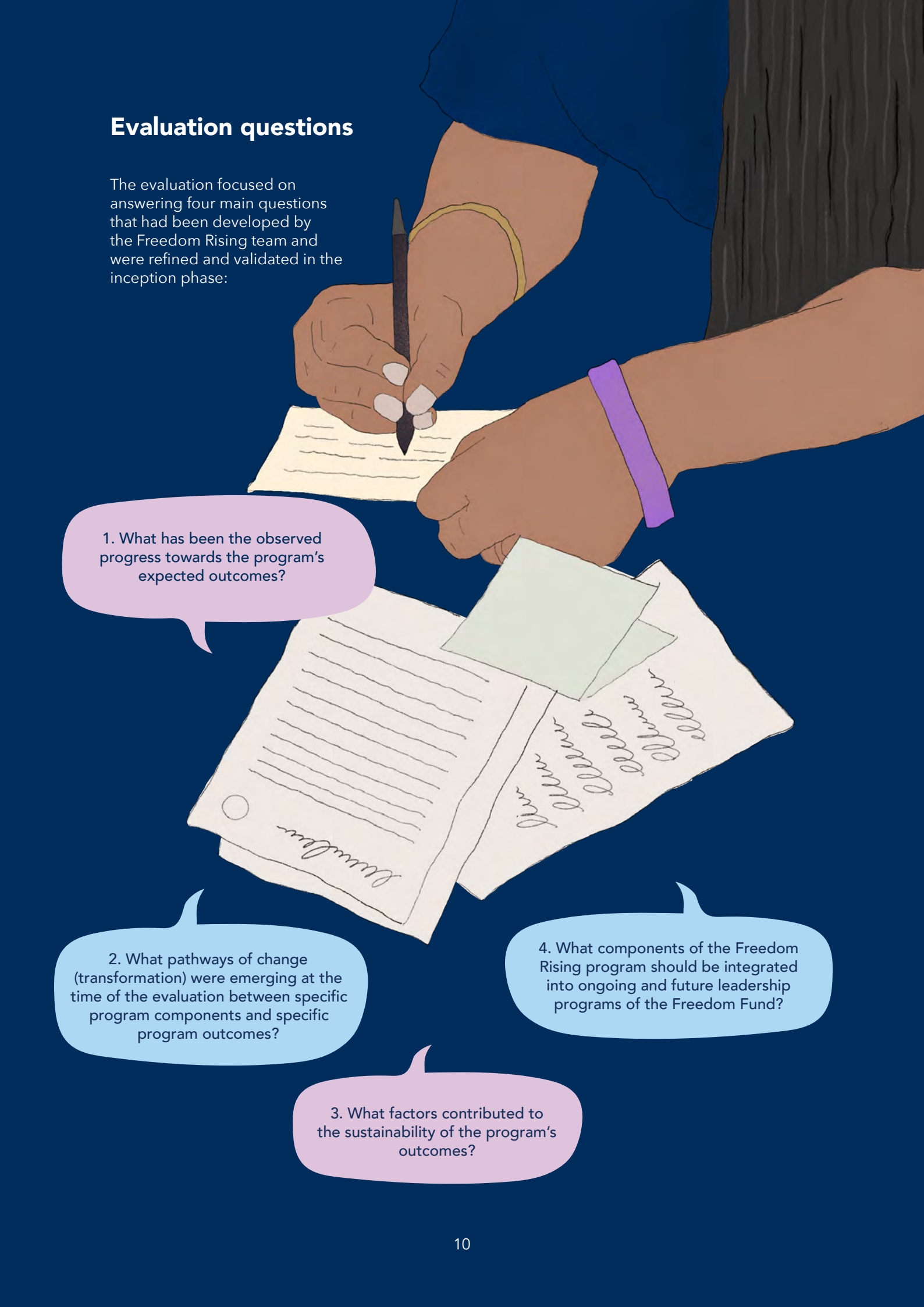
The evaluation was conducted between June to December 2024. The evaluation focused on determining the effectiveness of the program in progressing towards expected outcomes identified in the program's theory of change (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Freedom Rising's Theory of Change



Evaluation questions

The evaluation focused on answering four main questions that had been developed by the Freedom Rising team and were refined and validated in the inception phase:



1. What has been the observed progress towards the program's expected outcomes?

2. What pathways of change (transformation) were emerging at the time of the evaluation between specific program components and specific program outcomes?

3. What factors contributed to the sustainability of the program's outcomes?

4. What components of the Freedom Rising program should be integrated into ongoing and future leadership programs of the Freedom Fund?

Data collection and sampling

Data collection occurred from September to November 2024. The evaluation used a desk review of program reports, story collection/key informant interviews with program alumni from all five cohorts (Brazil, India, Nepal), key informant interviews with colleagues of program alumni as well as with movement leaders from the same three countries. Additional semi-structured interviews were conducted with implementing partners, facilitators and Freedom Fund program staff and consultants. Gender at Work's in-country researchers facilitated interviews in the participants' preferred languages (Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Nepali, English), either in person or virtually.

Over 130 interviews were conducted, engaging 42 of 119 participating organisations and 78 of 239 alumni (33%) across five cohorts of the Freedom Rising program. Alumni selection prioritised representation across gender, race/ethnicity/caste, migrant status and lived experience.

Additional key informant interviews were also conducted with six Freedom Fund team members and five of the Freedom Fund's implementing partners. See the Annex for more information on the methodology.

Figure 2: Summary of key informant interviews conducted

Group	Brazil (Recife)	Brazil (São Paulo)	Nepal	North India	South India	Total
Alumni	19	10	16	17	16	78
Colleagues	4	0	8	8	8	28
Movement Leaders	0	6	3	2	4	15

FINDINGS

Individual-level changes

The outcomes analysis of alumni interview data found **112** individual-level outcomes and an additional 36 relational outcomes. These individual-level outcomes were categorised by the evaluators into four types of changes.

In addition, participants demonstrated transformative shifts in how they understood leadership, which are also described here. The following sections delve into these changes, using participants' voices to illustrate these transformations and provide an understanding of the program's impact.



**Personal growth
and healing.**



**Addressing
unresolved
trauma.**



**More mindful
and respectful
of others.**




**Gaining confidence
and a sense of
personal power.**

Personal growth and healing

Alumni interviews across Brazil, India and Nepal cohorts revealed their perspectives on the relationship between the Freedom Rising program and shifts in personal growth and healing. Evidence from all three countries underscores how, by fostering spaces for learning and relationship-building, the program created a transformative environment for participants to reflect, prioritise self-care and reconnect with themselves at a deeper level.




Image: Final residential for the Freedom Rising cohort in Brazil in 2024. Credit Flora Negri/The Freedom Fund



The program allowed me to find myself again... [Before Freedom Rising] I still couldn't reconnect with the woman I was before all the violence. Where was that strong woman? But in this program, I found her again. She's here. I'm ready to fly again. That's what we want to make possible: for each woman to find that version of herself that was there before, the one who had to change and settle for a life she didn't want. Today, I'm moving forward and we're going to make it. In this program, I found the tools again. Moments like those in the program help us emerge from the darkness. It's something inexplicable. Alumni, Woman, Sao Paulo cohort, Brazil

Many participants, particularly those who had long disregarded their personal well-being in favour of professional or familial obligations, came to recognise that personal healing and growth were integral to their ability to support their organisations and communities. As their testimonies suggest, these shifts were not superficial – they represented a profound internal reordering of values and practices.

These narratives reflect a broader theme: personal growth is deeply rooted in the intentional and often challenging act of self-prioritisation. Freedom Rising provided the tools and validation necessary for participants to embrace their own needs, supporting them in their efforts to thrive both personally and professionally.



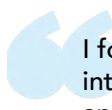
For the first time, I understood that prioritising my well-being didn't detract from my ability to support others. Instead, it made me stronger for them. Before the program, I often felt frustrated, aggressive and overwhelmed. My mind was constantly preoccupied with work and responsibilities, leaving no space for peace. Through the program, I learned how to manage my emotions and create balance in my life. I no longer over think everything and I've started carving out time for personal care. This program taught me that self-care isn't selfish – it's essential. I can give my best to those I support when I care for myself. This realisation has genuinely changed my life. Alumni, Man, Nepal

Before the program, many participants shared that they had deprioritised their own well-being, often putting work and activism ahead of their health. The program introduced the idea that self-care is not a luxury but a critical component of sustainability in social justice work. About one-third of the participants also reported adopting at least one new self-care habit, including yoga, journaling, improved sleep routines or setting work boundaries.

Addressing unresolved trauma

With the Freedom Rising curriculum, facilitators hoped to build a deep understanding of trauma and its far-reaching impact on participants' lives. By creating safe spaces for reflection, facilitating structured exercises and fostering shared narratives, the program offered participants meaningful opportunities to address and confront unresolved trauma in a supportive environment.

This structure allowed participants to process their emotions without fear of judgement, making it easier to acknowledge and work through deeply-rooted struggles. By addressing their own trauma, participants gained a deeper understanding of how to support healing in others, enhancing their ability to work effectively with vulnerable communities. The program also challenged participants to break patterns of self-neglect, which were often reinforced by societal pressures and unresolved trauma.




I found comfort in knowing that many participants were survivors who had turned their pain into leadership. This made me realise that addressing my healing was essential for becoming an effective leader. Alumni, Woman, Nepal

"Before the program, I never really thought about the power of respect in leadership. Now, I understand that leadership is not about control but about creating an environment where everyone feels valued. I now make an effort to acknowledge and uplift my colleagues." Alumni, Woman, Sao Paulo cohort, Brazil




More mindful and respectful of others

Many participants reported that the program deepened their awareness of how they interact with others and how to listen and communicate with empathy – and thereby foster more mindful and respectful relationships. Exposure to diverse experiences and perspectives allowed them to challenge biases and develop a greater appreciation for the needs and struggles of others. Respondents noted a shift in their approach to workplace dynamics, with many actively implementing more inclusive practices.



Before the program, I never really thought about the power of respect in leadership. Now, I understand that leadership is not about control but about creating an environment where everyone feels valued. I now make an effort to acknowledge and uplift my colleagues.
Alumni, Woman, Sao Paulo cohort, Brazil

Participants observed shifts not only in their own behaviour but also in their workplaces. The program's emphasis on power analysis and relational leadership led to changes in organisational culture, encouraging more inclusive and equitable workspaces. These changes are discussed in detail in the following section on organisational-level change.




I was already a good listener, but certain elements were missing. Today, I give more time; I let people express themselves in their own way. I resist the urge to immediately respond and instead focus on fully hearing what is being shared. Alumni, Man, Sao Paulo cohort, Brazil

Many participants highlighted an improvement in their listening and communication skills. They reflected on past behaviours where they would dominate conversations or overlook the perspectives of others. Through exercises on appreciative listening and non-hierarchical leadership, they learned to engage in more meaningful and empathetic dialogues. Several participants noted that this newfound ability to listen actively transformed their relationships, improving teamwork, reducing misunderstandings and fostering trust within their organisations.

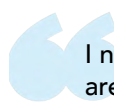
Gaining confidence and sense of personal power

For many, participation in the program led to increased confidence and a greater willingness to express their thoughts. Some who had previously remained silent in meetings or doubted their own abilities found the courage to assert themselves. Participants also described leaving the residentials feeling more confident in public speaking and decision-making.



I never used to talk a lot. Today my words are firm. When I talk to my coordinator, I say, 'this is my opinion, we should do this differently.' I feel strong and confident. Alumni, Woman, Brazil

Many participants reported shifts in how they perceived themselves and their roles within their organisations and communities. Many moved from self-doubt to confidence. Perhaps the most profound transformation was in participants' sense of personal power. Many reported newfound agency and leadership skills, as well as improvements in their capability to take ownership of their roles and responsibilities.



I noticed that children in my village were not able to access education because the schools are far apart. Before the program, I used to think about the problem but did not do anything about it. But after the program, I thought to myself – why do I not do anything to make changes? So, I started teaching young kids of my village myself. I started giving classes under the common area of the village to kids between the ages of 3 and 6. Often the villagers would look at me and think that I was stupid to do so but eventually they started sending their kids to my classes. Alumni, Woman, India

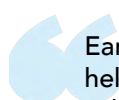
Many participants described how they took on leadership responsibilities in unexpected ways. Some ran community-based initiatives, while others advocated for policy changes and some transformed the way decisions were made within their organisations.

Perceptions of leadership



My perception of self has changed. I used to think that I was not a leader and could not be a leader. But I learned and now believe that everyone can be a leader. Alumni, Woman, North India

The data show various levels of transformation in participants' perceptions and conceptualisation of leadership following their engagement in the Freedom Rising program. They no longer saw leadership as a position but rather as a practice of collective influence. Participants often spoke about a profound shift from traditional, hierarchical understandings of leadership and of the responsibilities of a leader to more inclusive, empathetic and collective approaches. Before the start of the program, many participants viewed leadership as positional and often associated it with authoritative figures who unilaterally make decisions and are stern and commanding. However, the data show that through their experiences in the program, the participants came to think of leadership as a dynamic and participatory process involving collective agency, shared responsibility and deep listening.



Earlier I used to look at leadership as a dictatorship style. Now I look at it as a facilitator role, helping community members solve their own problems... If we work with a group then we will discuss it and we will take a decision unanimously and move forward and build the fabric of relationships within the organisation. Alumni, Man, North India

Several testimonies indicate a move away from a command-and-control style of leadership to a more facilitative and collaborative approach. These reflections demonstrate a broader shift in perspectives from top-down leadership to models prioritising inclusivity and collaboration.

A significant realisation that emerged from the testimonies is the central role of empathy and active listening in leadership. This shift in perspective underscores a broader understanding that leadership is as much about fostering relationships and emotional intelligence as it is about making decisions. Several participants emphasised that authentic leadership is grounded in the ability to deeply listen and understand the concerns of others rather than merely issuing directives.

The program also encouraged participants to challenge preconceived notions of leadership as an exclusive space for those with formal qualifications or extensive experience. Participants came to appreciate that leadership is not limited to individuals with high-ranking titles but can be for everybody. Several participants shared that they learned that leadership can emerge from those with lived experiences that equip them with the resilience and insight to guide others.

The shift from seeing leadership as conferred by status to recognising it as an evolving practice that anyone can embody represents a key transformation. A related and significant theme is the notion of leadership as a shared responsibility rather than an individual pursuit. Many participants spoke about the importance of enabling and nurturing future leaders within their organisations, recognising that leadership should not be monopolised but distributed across a team.


"I noticed that children in my village were not able to access education because the schools are far apart. Before the program, I used to think about the problem but did not do anything about it. But after the program, I thought to myself – why do I not do anything to make changes? So, I started teaching young kids of my village myself. I started giving classes under the common year of the village to kids between the ages of 3 and 6. Often the villagers would look at me and think that I was stupid to do so but eventually they started sending their kids to my classes." Alumni, Woman, India





"Leadership, for me, is about adopting a proactive attitude. It's about starting your work, doing your work and staying consistent in your efforts. Through the Freedom Rising program, I've come to see leadership as shining a light for others – not just in the moment, but with a vision that continues before and after any specific action. It's about connecting with people, amplifying their voices and building a collective movement for change. Leadership isn't just an individual role; it's about engaging with others to create something bigger than ourselves."

Alumni, Woman, North India



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Alumni, Woman, North India

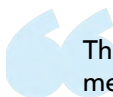
This new perspective allowed for a healthier, more balanced approach to leadership, reducing burnout and fostering long-term organisational growth. Participants also reflected on some of the limitations to individual leadership transformation they experienced, noting, for example, that personal and organisational power dynamics at play continue to present challenges to fully implementing inclusive leadership models.

As has been noted in earlier sections, Freedom Rising also prompted participants to engage in deep self-reflection, creating a space for participants to view themselves as leaders or reinforce that perception where it already existed. Several participants shared that they had not previously considered themselves leaders but left the program with a newfound confidence in their ability to lead. It is evident that the program successfully fostered intended individual-level changes by intertwining transformative approaches for personal growth, self-awareness and leadership development.

What contributed to the changes?

The transformational shifts observed at the individual level by alumni did not occur in isolation, but rather as a result of the cumulative and reinforcing effects of multiple program components. The Freedom Rising curriculum was designed to create an ecosystem of change, where each module and activity contributed to individual learning, leadership transformation and deeper organisational impact. The data highlighted that the participatory and experiential processes were critical in driving change.

Trauma-informed approaches helped participants recognise and address the impact of historical and personal trauma. Self-care methodologies were key to improving resilience and well-being, supporting alumni who were doing such challenging work and had traumatic lived experience not only sustain their engagement and leadership roles, but also promote the importance of care in development spaces. Safe spaces for self-reflection allowed participants to process emotions, traumas and personal histories, fostering deeper self-awareness and confidence. A key insight was the importance of addressing lived experiences of trauma and racism, with some participants in Brazil noting the need for facilitators with direct experience in these areas.



The Freedom Rising program was unlike anything I had experienced before. It helped me uncover parts of myself I hadn't acknowledged – hidden pain that I didn't realise had been affecting my work and personal life. Through the program's reflective exercises, I began recognising these unresolved emotions and their impact. It was eye-opening to understand how vital it is to address your issues, especially when working with survivors in the development field. Unresolved feelings can create barriers not just at work but also in relationships. This realisation has helped me become more open-minded and optimistic in my interactions.

Alumni, Woman, Nepal

Experiential learning exercises provided real-time leadership challenges that built skills and reinforced participants' ability to navigate complex situations. Peer-to-peer learning created a supportive environment where witnessing the growth of others strengthened personal commitment to transformation, while opportunities to critically examine power structures helped participants redefine leadership within their own organisations.

These changes did not happen in a linear fashion but were deeply interconnected, as was the intention behind Freedom Rising's curriculum. Developing mindfulness and respect for oneself and others often translated into improved listening and communication skills, fostering healthier team dynamics. Similarly, self-care practices led to greater confidence and self-esteem, which reinforced a stronger sense of personal power. This interconnectedness suggests that transformation was not a single event but rather a cumulative and self-reinforcing process, where progress in one area triggered further shifts in another.

“This program helped me develop leadership skills. I learned how to make the organisation stronger, how to help others and how to bring change in the society. I think about what leadership means for me and for others. For me, the meaning of leadership has changed and also the way I work. We practice active listening now to think more deeply and learn from our work with the community. Also, before, I never got the chance to think about myself. I was never present – I was working for others. This program allowed me the space and time to think about myself, who am I, what do I mean, what is important to me and how do I want to be and do things. Alumni, Man, North India

Organisational-level changes

Of the changes reported by alumni, 153 were coded by the evaluators as outcomes at the organisational level, of which 37 were changes that happened at the community level.

These outcomes were categorised into four types of changes:



More collaborative leadership and decision-making.



New organisational strategies, policies and practices.



Shifts in organisational culture.



Shifts in ways of working with communities.

Below are examples drawn from the interviews that illustrate what these changes looked like for alumni.

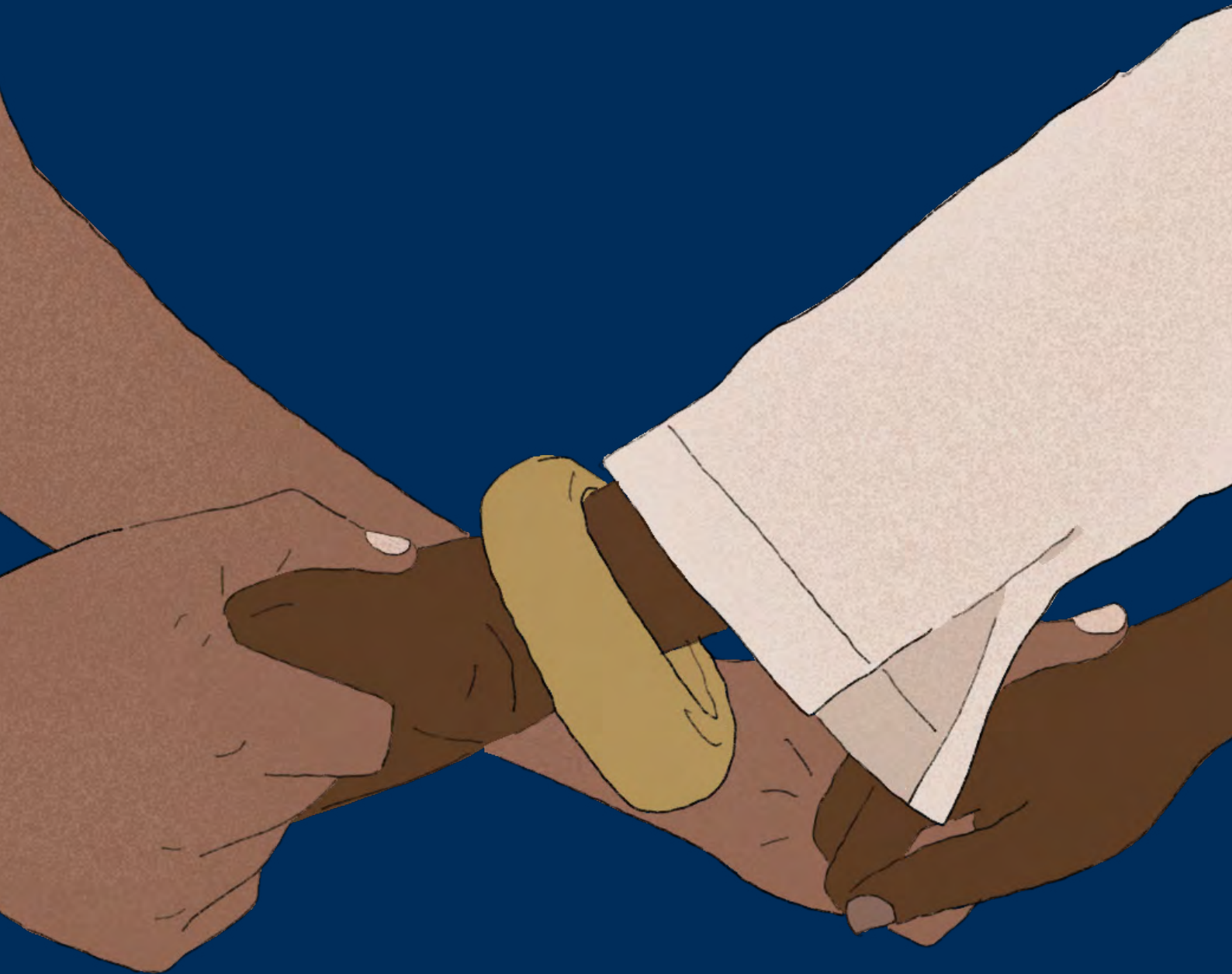
More collaborative leadership and decision-making practices

The evidence indicates a clear shift towards shared leadership models. Participants reported increased team collaboration and vitality, movement towards more inclusive leadership and the uptake of new models of leadership and decision-making.

“Before, in our organisation, there was an unspoken hierarchy that created fear among the team. We often thought of the staff as just people to complete assigned tasks, assuming they couldn't do more. In response, they simply followed instructions without much involvement. But the training changed everything. It encouraged us to work together – staff, community members, leadership and even the Board. We realised how much we didn't know about what the organisation truly needed. This made everyone take on specific responsibilities...This new approach of sharing responsibilities brought a big positive change for everyone. Alumni, Woman, North India

This reflects the adoption of a systems change approach, where organisations are decentralising power structures and fostering participatory leadership.

"Our Director and I realised during the Freedom Rising program that we need to improve and increase women's participation and leadership within our organisation, so we [made changes in the organisation] – at Board, staff and facilitator levels – after that."
Alumni, Woman, South India



The enhanced inclusivity in leadership aligns with the theory of change's emphasis on reimagining power structures. One leader noted:

“Since joining the Freedom Rising program, the way we work in my organisation has shifted significantly. One of the most significant changes is that decision-making has become more inclusive. Alumni, Man, Nepal

New organisational strategies, policies and practices

“Our Director and I realised during the Freedom Rising program that we need to improve and increase women's participation and leadership within our organisation, so we [made changes in the organisation] – at Board, staff and facilitator levels – after that. Alumni, Woman, South India

The Freedom Rising curriculum incorporated structured spaces for reflections on organisational systems and changes. The data show that intentional, impactful shifts were made to re-think organisational structures and develop a shared vision and sense of purpose for the organisations and individuals within those organisations.

Participants also spoke about how deep collective discussions led to an improvement in strategic clarity. In addition, as a result of all these conversations and re-articulation of shared vision and mission, enhanced strategic visioning was frequently reported.


“We focused on securing grants and, ideally, we can provide stipends for the volunteers who work with us. Alumni, Woman, Recife cohort, Brazil

This underscores the program's success in strengthening long-term planning capabilities. In addition to doing strategic planning, participants spoke about how their organisations have embraced more equitable hiring processes and developed safeguarding processes as direct outcomes of the program.

Image: Participants engaged in activities during the session “Revisiting Our Dream” as part of the grassroots leadership training program by the Freedom Fund in Dhulikhel, Nepal on Tuesday, May 2, 2024. Credit: Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund




This shift signals a concrete effort towards embedding intersectional lived experiences and diverse backgrounds into structural frameworks, reinforcing the program's role in reconfiguring organisational cultures. A leader added:



We expanded our board to include people from other marginalised groups, not just [redacted] community, making our leadership more inclusive. Alumni, Man, Nepal

These accounts confirm that inclusive representation is being institutionalised at multiple levels, aligning with the theory of change's sustainability objectives.




After participating in the Freedom Rising program, my organisation and I decided to address the historical trauma many of us have carried for years... The program helped me understand...that the shame and fear I felt weren't mine to carry but rather a result of the history my community has endured. This realisation led my organisation and I to establish a psychosocial counselling centre. Alumni, Man, Nepal

The integration of trauma-informed care and self-care, in addition to creating an inclusive work environment, marks a significant transformation within organisations, ensuring that leadership and operational frameworks prioritise well-being, inclusivity and survivor-led approaches. As participants in the Freedom Rising program have demonstrated, recognising historical trauma, amplifying lived-experience leadership and institutionalising self-care are essential steps in fostering resilience and long-term impact.

The data highlight the integration of trauma-informed care and safeguarding policies as critical to organisational transformation. This shift demonstrates the program's success in encouraging leaders to integrate trauma-sensitive approaches into their organisational frameworks, directly contributing to sustainable and inclusive structures. This shows a meaningful step toward embedding lived-experience leadership within organisational policies, a crucial indicator of the program's systemic influence. A critical organisational-level change has been the normalisation of self-care practices. As one alumni's colleague noted: *This shift illustrates a movement towards healthier work environments that prioritise staff well-being, reducing burnout and fostering long-term resilience.*

Shifts in organisational culture



We realised that when we practiced self-care, we also created a better space for everyone to work together harmoniously. Alumni, Woman, Recife cohort, Brazil


Improved teamwork and stronger relationships emerged as key transformations, fostering greater collaboration, communication and trust within organisations. *As a result of the Freedom Rising program, the institution held social dialogue circles.* Alumni, Woman, Recife Cohort, Brazil. This represents an intentional shift towards collective problem-solving and team integration.

An increase in organisational cohesion was reported, reflecting shifts towards more cooperative work cultures. This demonstrates how organisational health and culture are increasingly being viewed as essential to achieving mission-driven outcomes.


Building resilience has also been a central theme. Along with the issue of care and the lack of time for ourselves, we worked a lot on the issue of leadership succession. Alumni, Woman, Recife Cohort, Brazil. Leaders have reported embedding resilience-building mechanisms into organisational strategy, ensuring longevity and adaptive capacity.

Shifts in ways of working with communities

Data show that after participating in the Freedom Rising program, some organisations have shifted their ways of working and engaging with communities. One of the most significant shifts noted in participants' reflections is a transition towards participatory engagement with communities. Leaders have moved from a directive approach to a more inclusive and listening-based engagement, allowing for greater community ownership and participation.

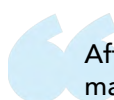
 In the past, we had a basic strategic plan, but it didn't fully reflect the voices of the people we serve. Now, we're working to create a strategic plan that directly involves their perspectives. For example, we've begun including survivors of trafficking in our planning process to ensure our policies address their lived experiences. The Freedom Rising program inspired us to take a closer look at how we work, and now we're creating policies that guide us in a realistic and impactful way. Alumni, Woman, Nepal

This highlights a broader shift towards community-led planning and problem-solving, ensuring that solutions are sustainable and relevant to the lived experiences of the people served. Another major shift is the adoption of collective and shared leadership models. This shift is helping leaders to build stronger networks within their organisations and communities. This has been particularly evident in the cases of India and Nepal.

 Now, when I go to the community, I try to explain to others that we are all leaders and we will solve our problems together. Alumni, Woman, North India

Several participants also highlighted the importance of applying gender-sensitive approaches to their community engagement, particularly in their work with youth and vulnerable groups. These approaches have increased trust between organisations and their communities and helped them more effectively identify and address gender-based challenges. They also described integrating active listening and participatory methods in their interactions with community members, enabling deeper trust and sustainable programming.

Alumni also spoke about a shift in perception around the meaning of resourcing. They shared that before the Freedom Rising program, they viewed resources as only monetary support but now reflect that individual, community knowledge, and community perceptions and support are also resources they should and can count on.

 After the session, we started to think about how can we utilise the resources we have and maximise them. Alumni, Man, Nepal

These examples illustrate how leaders have shifted their approach to ensuring long-term impact, using both local and external resources effectively to build resilient communities.

What contributed to the changes?

The changes observed at the organisational level across individuals, policies, relationships, culture, norms and engagement can be attributed to a combination of factors that worked cumulatively and reinforced one another throughout the program. During the four residencies, alumni gained essential tools to critically assess their organisations' structures, leading to conscious efforts to restructure governance and operational models.

Before, our team focused on writing technical reports, but now we include reflections on our work, improving how we learn from each other. Additionally, we expanded our board to include people from other marginalised groups, not just one community, making our leadership more inclusive. The Freedom Rising program gave me the tools and confidence to foster a collaborative and inclusive environment, transforming our organisation's culture. Alumni, Man, Nepal

The program created opportunities for the alumni to engage with diverse leaders (fellow participants of the process, facilitators, guests and implementing partners), resulting in shifts in perspectives and the adoption of new practices. Increased collaboration and more strategic planning initiatives emerged from these interactions, demonstrating the impact of peer-to-peer learning and sharing that took place in the residential sessions.

After the training, I started using some exercises with the staff to reflect on how far we've come and where we want to go. The exercise allowed everyone to share their story and journey and to feel heard. We then extended the same exercise to the community. Together, we explored the support within the community and discussed their rights. We heard each other. From then on, our staff began speaking more openly. Before this, they were hesitant to share their thoughts, unsure if they should. But these activities brought us closer. Alumni, Woman, North India

A key aspect of change was the space created for organisations to articulate their vision and develop actionable steps toward transformation. Another significant contributor to organisational change was the strengthening of individual leaders, which is discussed in the previous section. Many participants returned with increased confidence and strategic insight, leading to shifts in team dynamics and institutional policies. These elements collectively fostered an environment of learning, reflection and strategic growth, reinforcing the changes that took place at the organisational level.

Sometimes we sacrifice too much, prioritising work when it's not always necessary to be there. It was really valuable to learn self-care techniques and to realise how important self-care is for us as individuals and for our roles within the organisation. Alumni, Woman, Sao Paulo cohort, Brazil



Image: Participants engaged in activities during the session "Revisiting Our Dream" as part of the grassroots leadership training program by the Freedom Fund in Dhulikhel, Nepal on Tuesday, May 2, 2024. Credit: Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund

Movement-level changes

Of the changes described by Freedom Rising alumni, 47 were coded by the evaluation team that were related to movement-building outcomes. The reported outcomes fit broadly into three types of changes:



Understanding of the organisation's place in the (anti-slavery) ecosystem.



Solidarity and trust among leaders and organisations as a basis for joint work.



Strengthened and diversified collaborations and joint actions.

While there were fewer outcomes reported by participants that fit under the movement-building pillar in part due to the long-term nature of movement-building work, the changes described validated Freedom Rising's efforts to build a sense of shared experiences among leaders and organisations, enabling them to organise themselves for collective actions. The sections below provide powerful examples of what this meant for participants.

Image: Participants engaged in activities during the session "Revisiting Our Dream" as part of the grassroots leadership training program by the Freedom Fund in Dhulikhel, Nepal on Tuesday, May 2, 2024. Credit: Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund



Box 1: Definitions used by Freedom Rising [1]

A **social justice movement** is a set of people with a shared experience of injustice who organise themselves to build their collective power and leadership and develop a shared agenda for change, which they pursue through collective action with some continuity over time.[2]

Movement building is how we get there. How do those with shared experience – survivors and communities – organise and build collective power, shared leadership, shared dreams and plans for action? It is defined as the effort to build and amplify the collective power of women and other marginalised people.[3]


[1] Freedom Rising – Global Curriculum Residential Four.

[2] Batliwala, S. (2020). All About Power: Understanding social power and power structures, CREA., <https://creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/All-About-Power.pdf>.

[3] JASS (2013), Feminist Movement Builders Dictionary. Available from: <https://justassociates.org/all-resources/feminist-movement-builders-dictionary/>.


Understanding the anti-slavery ecosystem

The Freedom Rising curriculum contributed to a greater understanding of how organisations are part of a system working to fight (or sustain) the root causes of slavery. Participants described having greater sense of how the different struggles targeted by their organisations (domestic work, migrant labour, sex work, bonded labour) were all working towards similar goals. This understanding provided a basis for collective action.



We've established a support network with other grassroots organisations. They're from different areas, but we share common goals. We're organising activities where we can collaborate... The program gave us this wider perspective. Alumni, Woman, Sao Paulo cohort, Brazil

In addition, Freedom Rising, in the words of one participant, *contributed to a notable increase in awareness of modern slavery* Alumni, Recife cohort, Brazil and allowed participants to make the linkages between what seemed like disconnected issues they had been engaging with, often in silos.



The experience was new from the perspective of forming something together...to achieve something bigger! In some dialogues we questioned, as a collective, the deepening of some themes, such as the issue of women, black women, gender relations, feminism... Because we [learn] from social movements how social movements are configured, how they are and intertwine with new issues, such as those that were on the Freedom Rising agenda, which is modern slavery in a broader sense. Alumni, Woman, Recife cohort, Brazil

Participants described the value of their new understanding of how they fit within the anti-slavery movement ecosystem as providing insights into how they would like to engage with and influence it and each other. For some it provided new insights into the breadth of political advocacy work of cohort organisations at different levels: municipal, state, national and international.

Solidarity and trust as a basis for collaboration

“The program has facilitated collaborative relationships between organisations, particularly with two that had greater needs. Given the capacity and available time, there have been exchanges and support offered in various areas, such as resource sustainability. This includes assisting one organisation in understanding the requirements for formalisation, including the development of statutes and necessary documentation. Alumni, Woman, Recife cohort, Brazil

Alumni described the sense of solidarity and collective purpose they felt in learning about the work others were doing and where they fit alongside other local and regional actors in the system. Participants reported efforts to consolidate resources and to become less competitive in their interactions, an indicator of greater trust being established among them.

“We’ve formed a partnership with [another] community which, like us, is being attacked by a form of urban eviction. Alumni, Woman, Recife cohort, Brazil

Strengthened and diversified collaborations and joint actions

“We work with other organisations as change cannot be achieved singlehandedly by our organisation. Now whatever program we do, we invite and involve everyone who works in the same area or on similar issues there. We used to have ego that our name should be the highest in the program. But then we understood [after Freedom Rising] that it is an equal relationship of understanding with others, and we freely work together now, and it has a better result. Alumni, Woman, South India


Participation in Freedom Rising inspired alumni to be more open to connecting with other organisations and networks beyond their cohorts and especially across organisations that were part of their cohort. They described being more aware of the importance of collective action and working more closely with others to push for shared goals. They also described the impact of their participation in Freedom Rising in rekindling or strengthening existing relationships with other organisations and movements.



Image: Participants engaged in activities during the session “Revisiting Our Dream” as part of the grassroots leadership training program by the Freedom Fund in Dhulikhel, Nepal on Tuesday, May 2, 2024. Credit: Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund

What contributed to the changes?

One aim of Residential Four on leading movements was to make the invisible processes of movement building and systems change, and the invisible processes experienced in the residentials to date, visible. This sequential and cumulative learning supported through the residentials contributed to the changes described above in relation to movement building from appreciative listening, to trust and relationship building and to building a shared sense of purpose. The arc of the Freedom Rising movement-building process is aptly captured by one movement leader in their reflections on the impact of the program:



Freedom Rising invests in individuals, which I think is incredibly valuable. It empowers survivors and leaders to thrive by helping them understand their own power and importance. Programs like this boost confidence and help leaders approach their work with a renewed sense of purpose. I believe that by investing in people, the movement itself becomes stronger and more sustainable. I feel that Freedom Rising provided a space for participants to connect, reflect and grow, which is vital for both personal and collective progress. This program reminded me that better lives lead to better beliefs, and that's how movements evolve and thrive. Movement leader, Nepal

There was a hesitation among alumni to claim that Freedom Rising directly contributed to building an anti-slavery movement in the locations where it engaged. Although they described changes that contribute to movement building, such as greater joint analysis, increased collaborations and a greater sense of shared purpose among Freedom Rising participants. They emphasised that movements emerge organically and over time within the social fabric and can be supported but not built by external actors.

Participants observed that by bringing together leaders from different movements (child and adolescents' rights, domestic workers, women's and feminist movements, for example) the program provided the basis for rich and at times intense discussions about cross-movement building in support of shared goals and agendas.

Finally, interviewees highlighted the limitations of the time frame of the program to fully engage with important cross-movement work initiated during the residentials. Alumni appreciated the efforts that the program invested in bringing together leaders and organisations of various movements, facilitating dialogue and encouraging deeper understanding of the perspectives and priorities of the different movements as part of a wider program objective of building anti-slavery movements. However, despite having these spaces for discussion, Freedom Rising at times struggled to build alignment among participants. Where survivor groups/organisations described being supported by the process, there remained unresolved challenges how non-survivors would navigate processes of power transition beyond the end of the program.



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LESSONS LEARNED

The Freedom Rising program proved effective in fostering transformative leadership among frontline survivors and their organisations. The emphasis on transformative cannot be overstated. The approach and aspects of Freedom Rising that have been most impactful are those that offer something very different than typical leadership development programs. This section highlights key lessons from Freedom Rising that are relevant for the Freedom Fund and other organisations designing leadership programs. It synthesises findings on what worked well. Where relevant, it also references learning on aspects of the program where less progress was made or that participants described as having room for improvement.

Trauma-informed approach: The intentional design of the program using a trauma-informed approach strongly contributed to the effectiveness of Freedom Rising in supporting personal and leadership transformation. Access to a psychologist and nurse was critical for mental health support, allowing participants to discuss trauma linked to trafficking, violence and systemic oppression. The connections made between the impact of trauma on personal and on organisational life was a critical contribution of the program curriculum. At the same time, a few participants (Brazil) commented that the day-to-day lived experience of trauma and racism required more careful attention and approaches, and that these discussions need to be grounded and led by people with lived experience of trauma and racism.

Self-care prioritised: Freedom Rising modelled and integrated self-care as a core leadership strategy, particularly in its curriculum (valuing self-care, meditative and reflective practices). Post-pandemic, burnout among grassroots movements was widespread, and the program provided an opportunity to pause and reflect on what was happening and to reset with a focus on self-care. The increasing recognition of self-care as a resilience strategy within civil society and movement spaces underscores its relevance for future leadership initiatives.

Safe spaces created: In Freedom Rising, transformation was fostered by intentionally creating safe, inclusive and non-hierarchical spaces of trust and openness. This enabled deep discussions and self-reflection on identity, power and unconscious bias. Activities like active listening exercises with empathy and without judgment helped build trust, allowing participants to share experiences and learn from one another. Alumni transferred these skills to their organisations, strengthening collective leadership. The design also paid close attention to when participants did not appear to feel safe or included and, in such cases, facilitators adapted the design or made other supports available (including psychologists).

Peer-to-peer and experiential learning: The learning approach of the Freedom Rising program models principles of adult pedagogy and participatory action learning, which the participants deeply valued. Residential modules fostered solidarity and continued relationships and joint actions among some after the end of the program. The experiential learning through real time practical application of new skills and insights, through the exercises during sessions and through home tasks, was a highly effective learning methodology. The program's approach of combining experiential learning, reflection and community-building was key in fostering both personal and organisational transformation. Some participants reflected that the curriculum tried to cover too much even though the residencies were a reasonable duration. They felt this meant that there was insufficient time to immerse themselves in deeper discussions when points of conflict emerged, for example, around race and identity. As one alumni noted, it is in the conflicts themselves that new learning emerges, but that this learning had to shift "to the corridors." Alumni, Woman, Brazil.

Addressing power and multiple forms of oppression: The program centred power analysis and strategies for addressing power in both the design of the residencies and in the curriculum, which required grounded knowledge and skilled facilitation. While useful frameworks and tools were introduced through the Freedom Rising curriculum, facilitators sometimes struggled to navigate

power dynamics or to know how to effectively navigate their own positional power when it mirrored the structural inequality that Freedom Rising aimed to transform. Future programs should deepen engagement with systemic oppression and ensure skilled facilitation of power-related discussions.

Intentional about inclusion: The program design planned for inclusion. Several alumni reflected that they would not have been able to participate in Freedom Rising if their expenses were not fully covered and their missed days of work being reimbursed. To ensure equitable participation, the residencies had to be adapted quickly to accommodate disparities in literacy or lived experiences when they created gaps among participants. Attention needed to be paid to meaningful inclusion, not just in participant diversity but also within the structures and leadership of the organisations and even in the selection of program and facilitation teams.

Adaptation and flexibility: Flexibility and adaptation appeared to have become key bywords in the delivery of Freedom Rising, where the program required continuous adaptation across different country and regional contexts. The decision to work with locally engaged implementing partners was central to the Freedom Rising model, as these partners supported the adaptation and delivery of the modules for each cohort. This adaptation process required adequate time and collaboration with stakeholders and experts.

Expansive, transformative framing of leadership: The Freedom Rising program's unique strength lies in its expansive, transformative framing of leadership. Each of the key components of the program approach and curriculum, from the prioritisation of self-care to the integration of trauma-informed approaches to power analysis, were critical to fostering transformative, resilient and sustainable leadership of individuals, organisations and movements.

One of the most significant learnings from the evaluation is that the process or conditions under which leadership development programs are delivered are as crucial as the content, particularly in ensuring the sustainability of outcomes. It is important to note that despite positive indications of sustainability, participants expressed concerns regarding three key inhibitors to sustainable implementation of the program: time, political context and funding.

External pressures undermining long-term progress: Time was cited as a challenge due to the limited period between program completion and evaluation, daily pressures preventing deep organisational changes and the long-term nature of tackling systemic issues like modern slavery. Political contexts, including restrictions on civil society organisations, posed additional barriers. The lack of consistent, flexible funding for organisational priorities, not funder priorities, was identified as the most significant challenge to sustainability, inhibiting the continuation of ideas and actions initiated through the program. Despite tools and practices strengthening resilience, burnout remained prevalent as leaders grappled with political uncertainty and financial insecurities. Additionally, fragmented funding structures hindered collective movement-building efforts, leading to disjointed work across organisations. These challenges highlight the importance of sustained support and integrated coordination among civil society, donors and governments to ensure long-term impact of similar programs.



१. क्षेत्रहरू

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लक्षित समुदाय
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Image: Participants engaged in activities during the session "Revisiting Our Dream" as part of the grassroots leadership training program by the Freedom Fund in Dhulikhel, Nepal on Tuesday, May 2, 2024.
Credit: Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund

CONCLUSION

Overall, the evidence demonstrates that change pathways underpinning the Freedom Rising approach were largely valid. The program design and activities led to the expected outputs being achieved across all three change dimensions. These contributed to the achievement of the main expected outcomes at the individual-change and organisational-change level. For movement-level outcomes and impact, apart from some steps toward increased collaboration among leaders and organisations, there is less evidence to demonstrate direct program impact on movements to end modern slavery. Still, the changes reported by alumni describe important milestones in the longer-term process of movement building.

The Freedom Rising program has contributed to profound individual changes in the participants that will be sustained well beyond the end of the program. Through peer-to-peer learning and exchange, participants shared knowledge and strengthened abilities to develop relationships through personal, organisational and collective actions. New knowledge and skills supported many participants to behave differently both in leadership approaches that are more transformative (listening, empathy, less hierarchical management styles) and in strengthened relationships with family, community, colleagues and peers from other organisations.

The Freedom Rising program has contributed to significant organisational-level changes in the ways of working and shifts in internal organisational culture. In many cases participants described taking their visions and action plans back to their organisations and shared examples of inspiring others to work in ways that were consistent with these visions. They also developed and shared new policies, practices and resources for more inclusive and sustainable organisations, again with some positive results. The extent to which the results at the organisational level will be sustainable is mediated by many factors including resource constraints, most beyond the direct control of participants and their organisations.

The Freedom Rising program has contributed to new collaborations and joint actions among participant organisations (and others) that are milestones in supporting movement building. At the movement level, participants and their organisations reinforced existing relationships or built new relationships with others. They gained new insights and inspiration from learning how their work and organisations fit in the ecosystem of wider movements to end modern slavery. In terms of program outcomes, there was evidence of participants and their organisations diversifying their connections with other organisations, particularly within their respective cohorts, and in some cases reaching beyond to new organisations at national or international levels.

The Freedom Rising program has created an approach to feminist, transformative leadership building that is unique and deeply impactful that can serve as a model for other Freedom Fund leadership programs and other organisations. This approach is well suited for organisations that are working with or led by marginalised groups. While not explicitly designed as a feminist leadership program, its approach aligned with feminist principles, emphasising care, emotions, relationships, reflexivity and subjectivity, and feminist facilitation methodologies that create safe spaces for the difficult and needed conversations about power dynamics within organisational and movement structures and in societies where they are embedded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of Freedom Rising provides insights relevant to funders and leadership program implementers seeking to foster transformative leadership in organisations and movements. Building on the findings, lessons learned and conclusions, the evaluation offers the following recommendations for anyone implementing or thinking about transformative leadership in the human rights and anti-slavery sectors.

1. Include in the design and delivery of leadership programs the most effective elements of the Freedom Rising approach. These are, for example, designs that are trauma-informed and inclusive, prioritise self-care, centre peer-to-peer and experiential learning, and create safe spaces for building relationships and addressing power and multiple forms of oppression, both internal to organisations and in their work. These approaches are consistent with a transformative framing of leadership and contribute to transformative changes and resilience in leaders and organisations.

2. Transformative leadership programs are most effective when combined with other strategic resources. Regular, core support to organisations will provide the time, space and some stability for strategies, policies and practices to take root. For instance, the Freedom Fund should prioritise support to organisations that participated in Freedom Rising and which have expressed interest and commitment to building on the momentum unleashed by the program.

3. Leadership programs should integrate follow-up or ongoing accompaniment with workshops. The combination of the residencies with online support in between sessions from program teams was considered a positive practice of Freedom Rising. There is value in offering mentorship and other forms of technical support to supplement leadership training. Again, building and extending Freedom Rising good practice, leadership programs should consider supporting peer-to-peer networks, enabling knowledge-sharing platforms and supporting leadership cohorts to continue engaging with one another after initial contacts.

4. If movement building is part of the leadership program, consider providing strategic support to movement-building activities. For instance, funding opportunities for networking and facilitated learning exchanges among partners, resourcing of activities of networks and alliances, joint advocacy campaigns and policy initiatives. This includes funding leaders to participate in national, regional and global events. The important work by Freedom Rising to support systems thinking and systems change, particularly in relation to mapping the ecosystem, will be valuable for any transformative leadership program.

5. Finally, in the human rights and anti-slavery sectors, transformative leadership programs are directed towards nurturing leaders of organisations and movements. Those funding leadership programs, like the Freedom Fund, need to continue to leverage opportunities to advocate with other donors for transformative core, flexible and long-term funding to organisations and movements. Directing flexible and regular resources to organisational and movement leaders will help them to build resilience and independence over time.

ANNEX: METHODOLOGY OF THE EVALUATION

In addition to what is mentioned in the main report, the following details provide further information on the evaluation methods and approach.

Interview approach: The interviews with alumni combined an adapted Most Significant Change⁵ approach alongside semi-structured interview questions. They shared stories about program-influenced behavioural or organisational changes. The colleagues of alumni were individuals who had not participated in the Freedom Rising program but were identified by alumni as people who were well placed to share their own stories about the differences they had observed in the alumni since completing the program. They provided third-party validation of changes described by alumni themselves. Movement leaders were selected based on their connection to the anti-slavery movement and self-reporting some knowledge of the Freedom Fund.

Data analysis: Data from the interviews with alumni and their nominated colleagues were translated, analysed and summarised by each of the country cohort evaluation team members, using a standardised interview template structured around the key evaluation questions. A coding sheet adapted from Outcome Harvesting⁶ was used to identify the described outcomes (behaviour change or actions taken) and classify outcomes by level (individual, organisational, movement, relational) and identify contributing program elements. This enabled a pathways analysis, that is, for patterns to emerge on the specific components or design elements of the Freedom Rising program that interviewees mentioned as contributing to the changes/outcomes described. The findings were validated through participatory workshops in December 2024 with alumni and implementing partners.

Ethical considerations: The evaluation followed ethical and safeguarding protocols used by the Freedom Fund. The evaluation team, experienced feminist facilitators, ensured safe, inclusive spaces and adhered to a “Do No Harm” framework. Participants received clear, accessible information on their involvement, including data collection, usage and rights. Consent was obtained in written or verbal form. All personal data was anonymised, with transcripts assigned alphanumeric codes and only one team member having access to personal data. Data analysis used only coded data. A safeguarding focal point was available via WhatsApp and Signal throughout the evaluation.

Limitations: A survey was not deemed feasible to reach all Freedom Rising alumni, but the sampling strategy covered 33% of total alumni, ensuring representation across cohorts and organisations. The evaluation relied on self-reported changes, with potential bias mitigated by corroborative evidence from third-party observers within organisations. Data analysis was limited as interviewees were not asked to self-identify across key demographic factors (caste, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, survivor status), though their narratives provided valuable insights. Additionally, variations in cohort timelines, ranging from weeks (Nepal, São Paulo) to two years (South India), affected the consistency of reported outcomes, particularly in assessing sustainability.

5. The Most Significant Change (MSC) approach involves generating and analysing personal accounts of change and deciding which is the most significant – and why. For more information, see <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/most-significant-change>.

6. Outcome Harvesting collects (“harvests”) evidence of what has changed (“outcomes”) and, working backwards, determines whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes. For more information, see <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/outcome-harvesting>.



Image: Final residential for the Freedom Rising cohort in Brazil in 2024.
Credit: Flora Negri/The Freedom Fund

VISION

We invest in frontline organisations and movements to drive a measurable reduction of modern slavery in high-prevalence countries and industries.

MISSION

Our mission is to mobilise the knowledge, capital and will needed to end slavery.

The Freedom Fund (UK)

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

 www.freedomfund.org

 info@freedomfund.org

The Freedom Fund (US)

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

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