

Dignity Beyond the Walls

Rescuing slaves does not end the moment they are freed from captivity. To abandon the rescued and expect them to fend for themselves would leave them vulnerable to falling back into a forced labor relationship with a different owner. Abolitionists therefore must answer the question “What next?” before they rush into a rescue plan.

That solution probably will not be as simple as “sending them back home.” In some cases, enslaved individuals were trafficked across borders, perhaps from even an ocean away. Even if the brothel owner or pimp can be brought to justice, the victims may be ongoing targets for the original traffickers who extracted them from their home village.

Though social workers throw around terms like reintegration and restoration, the process of aftercare often turns out to be far more complicated. Teenage girls freed from a brothel may decide that a pattern of shame and abuse awaits them in their home village, so they elect to build a new life elsewhere. Because they are likely to experience intense emotional trauma from repeated episodes of sexual abuse, they may need a supportive environment free of recrimination.

Interviews with forced laborers that IJM helped rescue from a rice mill reveal yet more complexity. Among the rescued, twenty-five of the laborers have a kinship relationship.

When the matriarch of the family was asked where she was from originally, she gave a puzzled look and replied, “The rice mill.” She explained that her father had been pressed into labor when he was in his twenties, so she had worked in the rice mill her entire life. She raised her own children as laborers in the same mill.

As the matriarch recounted the saga of four generations of servitude that began with a \$10 loan, her thirty-five-year-old daughter offered pieces of her own story. She too had met her husband at the rice mill. They were raising three children, ages eleven, thirteen, and eighteen, who had a long future of boiling and drying rice ahead of them. IJM and a local magistrate teamed up to alter their destiny overnight. What would “sending them back home” mean to this family and to millions of forced laborers with similar histories?

IJM today helps sixteen hundred people, former slaves and their families, in a broad array of aftercare programs. For the period immediately following a rescue, IJM collaborates with a network of relief partners to provide ex-slaves with shelter, food, emotional counseling, and protection from vindictive owners. Except in extreme circumstances of imminent violence, the agency will delay executing a rescue plan until it has a long-term support structure in place.

IJM assists former slaves in obtaining loans or grants from local authorities and available government land for houses. Additionally, IJM helps former slaves enroll their children in public school, often the most important tangible right that those in slavery so desperately want.

How critical is effective aftercare? Monitoring the results of its own programs, IJM learned that 93 percent of the former slaves it places in a supportive environment do not return to bondage.

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