

2009 Harriet Tubman Award Winner

Shramajivee Mahila Samity | India

It happens every day. Slave traffickers pose as legitimate labor recruiters and entice villagers to hop aboard a train. Leave poverty behind, the traffickers say, there's plenty of work and good pay in the city.

Hundreds of thousands of rural women and children have taken the bait, lured by offers to work as maids.

India's growing economy has sparked a booming demand for domestic servants to cook and clean for the nation's growing high-tech elite.



Harriet Tubman Award

is given to a community-based organization that is demonstrating how slavery can be dismantled and destroyed. Named

after an escaped American slave who guided dozens of other slaves to freedom on dangerous missions that utilized the network of safe houses known as the Underground Railroad.



India's Dirty Work

But for many who make the trip, it's a slave trap. They are beaten or raped by homeowners or traffickers. Some are threatened with death if they speak up. They are hundreds of miles from home, penniless in an unfamiliar place. They are house slaves, lost in leafy suburbs.

"I asked for my wages after two months but the lady refused," says Haseena Bibi. "That's when I realized that I was trapped."

"The agents took me to their house and tortured me," recounts survivor Nilima Berni. "Their wives never prevented their husbands from beating me. I was threatened by the agents that if I opened my mouth they'd just kill me."

Fighting Domestic Slavery

The Working Women's Association, Shramajivee Mahila Samity (SMS), battles domestic slavery on several fronts.

SMS goes undercover to expose traffickers and trace missing people. Posing as homeowners wanting a maid, teams investigate which domestic labor agencies are fronts for slave trafficking. They even interview former

traffickers to learn the tricks of the slave trade. SMS is calling for government regulations to end the wild-west lawlessness that makes trafficking easier.



The rice paddies of the Ganges River Delta are a trafficking hotspot. Lured by false promises of good jobs, impoverished villagers send family members to Indian cities to earn money. Many discover it's a slave trap.



Not every maid is mistreated or enslaved, which makes it easier for slave traffickers to pose as legitimate labor recruiters.

SMS helps slavery survivors return home and rebuild their lives. Slaveholders are pressured to hand over back-pay. Women are trained to open small businesses, so they can earn a living without moving away from home.

SMS educates villagers how to slave-proof their communities. Street dramas teach people how to see through the false promises made by traffickers. Women's committees learn to act fast when someone is taken.

Thanks to SMS, hundreds of slaves have been reunited with their families. The level of trafficking has been slashed in many villages where SMS works.

Changing Attitudes About Women

SMS activists also fight slavery by striving to change the way people think. They say poor women will be less vulnerable to slavery when attitudes change about the worth of women in society. It's a message that resonates with many rural women hungry for change. About 28,000 women are members of SMS.

"I dream of a future when girls learn to think that we are not mere commodities," says SMS activist Swapna Tripathy. "We must be properly educated. We should have our own self-identity and self-respect. That's all I want. And those days are going to come."