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US-based Fair Food Program (FFP) to Consult in Adaptation of FFP's Proven Protections to Prevent Brutal Labour Abuses Exposed in Mumbai High Court, Indian Press, and Hard-Hitting New York Times Series

MAHARASHTRA 3 March 2025 – A coalition of labour and human rights groups – coming together under the banner of the newly-formed India Sugar Industry Workers Association (ISWA) – is launching an ambitious collaboration to end longstanding human rights abuses in India's multi-billion-dollar sugar industry.

The emerging initiative includes several leading grassroots labour organizations representing sugarcane cutters in the key sugar-producing states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh, which collectively account for approximately 85% of India's sugar production. The abuses that gave rise to the collaboration – including tens of thousands of women farmworkers subjected to forced hysterectomies and debt bondage arrangements that in some cases stretch across generations – came to light through several recent, high profile legal actions and investigative articles by Indian and international media outlets, including [The Hindu](#) and the [New York Times](#).

The labour and human rights groups associated with **ISWA**– are looking to the US-based Fair Food Program (FFP) for inspiration as they begin the slow and careful process of designing and building their own initiative to enforce farmworkers' fundamental human rights in India's sugarcane fields. The FFP has successfully addressed similar issues in the US agriculture industry and has received [widespread recognition](#) for its groundbreaking [Worker-driven Social Responsibility](#) (WSR) model, a new paradigm for enforcing human rights in global supply chains based on binding legal agreements between worker organizations and the corporate brands at the top of global markets that set humane standards for workers in their suppliers' operations.

Launched in 2010 by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), and partnering with some of the world's largest food corporations, the FFP has transformed the working and living conditions of tens of thousands of farmworkers across 23 states in the US, eradicating abuses from forced labor to sexual assault. With worker-to-worker rights education, a 24/7 complaint hotline protected from retaliation, independent third-party monitoring, comprehensive field audits, and market consequences for the failure to comply with its human rights standards, the FFP's unique mix of monitoring and enforcement tools has been called the "[new gold standard](#)" for social responsibility. The FFP received a The United State of America Presidential Medal for its "extraordinary success in the fight against modern-day slavery" in 2015 and was recognized by the US Department of Agriculture as the highest form of human rights protection in the US agricultural industry in 2024.

The Worker-driven Social Responsibility model refers to an approach to [Human Rights Due Diligence \(HRDD\)](#) where workers themselves actively lead the process of monitoring and enforcing labour standards within a company's supply chain, directly engaging with brands and retailers through legally binding agreements, giving workers more power to protect their rights and address abuses within the system. This model is often cited as a more effective approach than the traditional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) paradigm, which has proven [widely ineffective at its stated purpose of protecting human rights](#) in global supply chains. Thanks to its unique success, the WSR model has expanded today to multiple industries – including garment, dairy, and construction – and is active on five continents, and going to first ever in Asia!

ISWA intends to build a robust WSR program within the Indian sugar industry, empowering sugarcane cutters to serve as frontline monitors of their own rights and, in the process, providing a proven system of human rights due diligence for global brands sourcing from India. ISWA is committed to partnering with international brands to ensure that India's labour laws – particularly those barring forced labor and sexual violence – are implemented in the sugar industry supply chain.

The development process will necessarily take time to design and build an effective program. ISWA coalition leaders will not only have to adapt the FFP model to the particular structures and dynamics of the Indian sugar industry; build and train staff in the WSR model's exacting methodology and unique audit and complaint investigation protocols; and raise funds to launch a pilot project with sufficient resources to carry out their plans; they also expect to be faced with resistance from the existing, and [demonstrably failed, social audit industry](#), an \$80 billion industry worldwide, with vested interests in remaining the dominant paradigm for corporate social responsibility.

“India is poised to become a global manufacturing leader, and the adaptation of the Fair Food Program to India's burgeoning sugar industry offers an excellent opportunity to address labour concerns within the country's supply chains at a critical moment in India's history,” stated Chandan Kumar of ISWA. “This partnership will help Indian producers align with global standards and respond to international calls for greater transparency and accountability in supply chains. ISWA also feels strongly that such a program will uplift the lives of tens of millions of Indian citizens in a way that will only serve to strengthen the world's largest democracy”

“We have seen firsthand the unparalleled impact of the FFP in the fields,” said Lucas Benitez, a farmworker and co-founder of the CIW. “Immokalee was once called ‘ground zero for modern-day slavery’ by federal prosecutors here in the US,” continued Benitez. “But now, thanks to the FFP, we have eradicated forced labor on participating farms, and Florida's fields are called ‘the best workplace environment in American agriculture’ on the front page of the New York Times. We look forward to partnering with sugarcane workers in India to help bring that same transformation to India's sugar industry — for the benefit of all, workers, farmers, and corporate buyers alike,” he added.

The CIW and the Fair Food Program have pledged to provide technical support and guidance to implement WSR in India's sugar industry. ISWA is calling on all global brands sourcing sugar from India to join in this new partnership and become industry-leading change agents in ensuring fair labour practices throughout the entire supply chain.

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The India Sugar Industry Workers Association (ISWA) is a coalition of grassroots labour organizations representing sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh.