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THE TIME IS NOW FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN INDIA'S SUGAR INDUSTRY TO PROTECT SUGARCANE HARVESTERS FROM REPEATED, OUTRAGEOUS ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION

In the wake of last year's high-profile exposé in the New York Times and High Court findings of unconscionable conditions in India's sugar fields, the New Year begins with fresh reports of abuse, including over 50 sugarcane harvesters held in conditions of modern slavery and children sexually assaulted on plantation premises while their parents labour in the fields

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This New Year, while popular consumer brands at the top of the sugar industry's supply chain celebrate profits and publish glossy sustainability reports, sugarcane harvesters and their families in India are living a reality that resembles 18th-century slavery in the 21st-century food system.

On 27 December 2025, the Times of India reported the [rescue by police of 53 tribal workers](#) who were held in debt peonage in Maharashtra's Solapur district for nearly two months and were forced to work in sugarcane fields, often without pay. The reports allege that these workers were beaten by supervisors when they asked for their wages, and were subjected to physical abuse and sexual harassment at the hands of their farm bosses. A case of human trafficking and related offences have been registered by the Ghantali Police, Pratapgarh, in Rajasthan, where these workers were recruited.

Later that same week, local media in Maharashtra and The Hindu reported that on 24 December 2025, two girls whose family had been recruited to work in Maharashtra as sugar harvesters [were reportedly dragged out of the temporary and insecure farm labour housing they lived in, and raped by two men](#). According to initial reports, the girls were assaulted in nearby sugar and cotton fields while their parents were working.

These two cases, emerging from the same egregious conditions already exposed by international media investigations, [most prominently reported in 2024 by the New York Times](#), are not aberrations. Unfortunately they are just the tip of an iceberg of forced labour, sexual violence, and extreme exploitation in India's multi-billion dollar sugar supply chain. In the same sugar growing regions that anchor the global supply chains of some of the world's largest food and beverage companies, those investigations highlighted forced migration, debt bondage, child labour, and coerced hysterectomies among women harvesters.



The Bombay High Court has also officially recognized the unconscionable conditions facing sugarcane workers, as reported by The Hindu in 2023. Yet despite the widespread and confirmed suffering and exploitation of the workers who harvest their sugar, leading consumer-facing brands – including some of the largest corporations in the world – continue to oppose solutions that workers put forth to address the root causes of the conditions they suffer.

The Indian Sugar Workers Association (ISWA) stands with the grieving families in these most recent cases, and with hundreds of thousands of other sugarcane industry workers, many of whom labour against their will in horrendous conditions, coerced by the debt peonage that underlies labour hiring practices in India's sugarcane fields.

To remedy – and ultimately prevent – this outrageous exploitation, ISWA urgently calls on the global brands that purchase Indian sugar to engage with workers and collaborate in the implementation of the only internationally recognized solution to forced labour and related abuses for the most vulnerable workers in global supply chains – the Fair Food Program's Worker-driven Social Responsibility model.

SUGAR WORKERS PROPOSE A POTENTIAL SOLUTION

ISWA, on behalf of sugar industry workers, has proposed a proven solution to the brands that source and use India's sugar – a Worker-driven Social Responsibility program, [modelled on the award-winning Fair Food Program](#) and designed for India's sugar industry. However, the brands at the top of the supply chain of this billion-dollar industry have yet to give the workers' proposal serious consideration.

It is no longer credible for consumer brands to claim adherence to strong human-rights commitments while sourcing from sugarcane farms where minors may be raped, tribal workers held in bondage, women pressured into life-altering surgeries to keep working, and children forced to labour in the fields.

Traditional audits, certification logos, and corporate public-relations campaigns have not prevented these harms or their underlying causes. They have, at best, documented some issues after the fact, and at worst, provided public relations cover, while allowing business to continue as usual. Meanwhile, meaningful structural solutions to the longstanding abuses in India's sugar fields – a human rights program built with the enforcement power necessary to overcome entrenched systems of abuse – remain a distant dream for over a million hard-working, long-suffering labourers at the base of this massive industry.

ISWA calls on the major buyers of Indian sugar to partner with ISWA and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in the development of a worker-driven model for the Indian sugar industry. This adaptation of the WSR model would begin with a pilot based on the CIW's Fair Food Program – recognized by industry, government and human rights leaders alike as the new gold standard in social responsibility in global supply chains – with binding standards, worker education on their rights, market-based enforcement and comprehensive monitoring, including in-depth audits and a 24/7 complaint mechanisms activated by workers. This is not a radical demand; it is the minimum required standard to stop modern slavery in sugar supply chains.



ISWA also calls on consumers, workers and human rights organisations around the world to stand with sugarcane harvesting workers in India by:

- Refusing to accept sugar produced through debt bondage, sexual violence, coerced surgeries on women's bodies, and child labour as an acceptable cost of doing business.
- Demanding that consumer brands publicly disclose their sugar-sourcing regions in India and commit to a clear timeline to implement a binding, worker-driven program with independent monitoring and real financial consequences for abuse.
- Supporting campaigns and public action seeking accountability not only from brands, but also from their major investors.

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