

2.2.7. Return and long-term reintegration of victims of trafficking

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Actors involved

Multiple actors - including government bodies, international organisations, and NGOs - are involved in the reintegration governance of Nigerian returnees. In 2019, the Nigerian government led the development of the Guidelines for Facilitating the Safe, Dignified and Voluntary Return, Readmission and Reintegration of Migrants in Nigeria Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), which entered implementation in 2020. The National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI) is the designated agency responsible for coordinating reintegration efforts and for the implementation of the SOP. The SOP contains guidance for reintegration processes, in alignment with international legal standards, and is intended to enhance coordination among stakeholders involved in the reintegration of returnees.[204] These stakeholders include the Nigeria Immigration Service, which is tasked with documenting and processing returnees; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose diplomatic missions support the return of stranded migrants; and NAPTIP, which delivers rehabilitation support to returned victims of trafficking. NAPTIP also engages with regional and local authorities, international organisations, and community-based organisations in the implementation of the SOP. At the regional level, the Edo State Task Force Against Human Trafficking (ETAHT) - which became the Edo State Migration Agency (EDMA) in 2024 - has played a leading role in reintegration governance.[205] Also, the Nigerian government collaborates with the Network of Civil Society Organisations Against Child Trafficking, Abuse and Labour (NACTAL) to ensure referral of victims.[206]

As part of the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme, IOM provides support to Nigerian returnees, including returned victims of trafficking.[207] Since 2016, IOM has implemented the EU-IOM Joint initiative[208] for Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme for Sub-Saharan Africa (MPRR-SSA) funded by the European Union (EU). Since October 2022, IOM has supported the voluntary return of over 20 970 Nigerian migrants under the MPRR-SSA,[209] primarily from Libya and Niger.[210]Top of Form IOM also runs the Enhanced Reintegration Support for Survivors of Trafficking (ERS) project in Nigeria aiming at equipping survivors with business development skills, also offering them small business grants.[211]

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have been critical partners in addressing and managing return migration in Nigeria. In Edo State, several NGOs operate as a network of CSOs to provide

psycho-social support to victims of trafficking, legal assistance and counselling, advocacy, case reporting to the authorities, and community sensitisation.212 Religious organisations also provide counselling and shelter services to trafficking victims for reintegration purposes.213

Victim identification and access to support

1. As explained by Dr Sarah Adeyinka, in most cases, the modality of return determines the type of support that returned victims receive. This is largely because, in the case of EU-funded reintegration schemes, the available support and eligibility criteria are set by the donor. Individuals return to Nigeria through three main ways: forced return, self-funded or family-funded return, and assisted return through IOM's AVRR programmes. When people return through the AVRR, there is usually some form of reintegration support and assistance. This also means that returnees are officially registered, and both NCFRMI and NAPTIP are informed. When people return spontaneously, using their own or their family's money, they often come back through the same migration routes they used when leaving. In these cases, neither NAPTIP nor NCFRMI are aware that they are back in the country (or even left). As a result, 'many victims of trafficking return completely under the radar.'214

NAPTIP reported to have rescued and received 6 162 trafficking victims from September 2021 until August 2024.215 Between 2017 and the first quarter of 2024,216 IOM facilitated the voluntary return of 4 877 Nigerian victims of trafficking, comprising 4 261 females (87 %) and 616 males (13 %). IOM informed that, in coordination with relevant government agencies, civil society organisations and non-governmental partners, they supported the reception and reintegration of these individuals upon their return, providing safe and secure shelter, family tracing and reunification services.217

Access to reintegration services for returnees is typically facilitated through various pathways. These include automatic referrals, when individuals are identified as survivors at border entry points; self-referral, when returnees independently seek assistance from NGOs, the Ministry of Women Affairs, or NAPTIP offices; community or family reporting, when relatives or community members alert NAPTIP; and referrals through IOM's AVRR programmes.218

Victims who return through their own or family means may seek support from organisations but are often told they cannot be assisted because they did not return through an assisted programme. Reintegration assistance provided by the Federal Government through the NCFRMI is accessible to all returnees but remains very limited due to inadequate funding.

Also, while NCFRMI, some churches, and NGOs - such as Media Coalition & Awareness to Halt Trafficking (MeCAHT) - offer help regardless of return modality, most returnees are unaware of this. After being turned away a few times, they assume no support is available. The same applies to those forcibly returned. Dr Adeyinka noted how, in such cases, the risk of re-trafficking increases, as traffickers may approach returnees offering help to return abroad. 'This creates a cycle of vulnerability and allows human trafficking to continue and thrive.'219

According to Dr Adeyinka, despite ongoing efforts, gaps in victim identification persist. In some cases, even victims of trafficking returning to Nigeria through the IOM's AVRR programme are not identified as victims upon arrival at the airport - and as a result, they receive no support at all. For her Reintegrate Study, Dr Adeyinka interviewed 69 returnees; 41 were victims of trafficking, but only four had been recognised by NAPTIP, while the remaining 39 victims - many of whom returned through the IOM scheme - arrived at the airport without being identified.[220]

Shelter

NAPTIP operates 14 shelters across the country (in FCT, Lagos, Benin, Enugu, Sokoto, Uyo, Kano, Maiduguri, Osogbo, Ekiti, Yobe, Makurdi, Katsina, Ondo).[221] Services provided at the shelters include food, clothing, hygiene products, and basic educational courses. Victims in NAPTIP shelters are hosted for a maximum of six-week, and referred to NGOs-run shelters if longer stay is needed.[222] Usually, people may stay longer than six weeks, if they are under protection, or cooperate with NAPTIP to prosecute their traffickers.[223] As noted by Dr. Adeyinka, the number of trafficking victims exceeds the available shelter capacity. As a result, NAPTIP is struggling to accommodate everyone in need. The same source added that representatives of the Lagos State Neighbourhood Agency (LSNA) reported frequent interception of trafficking cases at the Nigeria-Benin border. A key challenge they face is the lack of accommodation for victims. Although referrals are made to NAPTIP, overcrowding often prevents intake. As a result, LSNA is left with the options of either sending victims home or placing them in police cells overnight, despite the victims not being criminals. Many choose to leave, increasing the risk of re-trafficking. When victims are intercepted by NAPTIP and their shelters are full, they are referred to verified NGOs for support. NAPTIP maintains collaboration with many NGOs and regularly makes referrals. For example, many victims are referred to MeCAHT in Abuja.[224] NAPTIP has a 'closed shelter' policy, meaning that individuals living at the shelter are not allowed to receive visitors or leave the premises freely.[225] Observers raised concerns about the restrictive shelter environment potentially re-traumatising victims and reported instances where victims and suspects were housed within the same compound due to space constraints.[226]

Besides NAPTIP shelters, there are other state-run shelters, including in Lagos State and in Benin City (Edo State). In Lagos State, there are also IOM and Lagos State-run 'transit' shelters, where individuals may stay for a certain period - depending on how long the evacuation process takes and when they plan to travel back to their state of origin.[227] Various NGOs and faith-based organisations also provide shelters for trafficking victims.[228] Most of the shelters available, whether run by civil society, government, or international partners, are female-only shelters. The only shelters for male returnees at country level are the Patriotic Citizens Initiative (PCI), located in Lagos and run by a civil society organisation (it can accommodate around 20 beneficiaries); [229] one operated by the NGO Society for the Empowerment of Young Persons (SEYP) in Benin city (Edo state) and another one run by Caritas Nigeria also based in Benin city.[230]

Lack of funding, including for NAPTIP shelters, affects the ability of these shelters to operate effectively.[231] Roland Nwoha, director at IRARA Nigeria, noted that some shelters remain unused. Despite ongoing efforts by the operators to improve them – the source added - many of

these shelters were not originally designed for trafficking victims and lack appropriate facilities, such as childcare, maternal care, or psychological support. Stigma also plays a role, as staying in a shelter can label individuals as trafficking victims. Additionally, strict rules, such as restricted movement and no visitors, discourage use, especially for returnees who experienced similar confinement abroad.232 The same source informed that returnees within Frontex Reintegration projects233 – of which IRARA is an implementing partner – are entitled to on-arrival support, which allows them to stay in a hotel for about five days while they plan their next steps. During this time, some choose to join friends or relatives, or return to their families if the environment is supportive. However, many prefer not to go back to their families due to stigma or a desire for independence. The hotel-stay gives them space to decide, while the NGO arranges long-term accommodation and activates the reintegration package to support them in renting a permanent place.234

Effective reintegration

Nigerian returnee victims of trafficking face various obstacles to reintegrate, mainly due to financial pressures, challenges reconnecting with family, and stigma.235 Women returnees especially experience significant reintegration challenges, including lack of family support, financial instability, and unemployment.236 Women who return pregnant or with children may experience additional difficulties, including family rejection and economic hardship.237 UN Women stated that promised reintegration support has often failed to materialise for returnees and widespread perceptions persist that institutions, including the United Nations, have failed to adequately support victims and survivors.238 At the same time, IOM reported that, out of the total 4 261 trafficked victims they have assisted to return between 2017 and the first quarter of 2024, 3 122 (64 %) had been ‘completely reintegrated into the society’, 34 % remained in the process of reintegration, 2 % had the ‘reintegration deactivated’.239

Reintegration services for trafficking victims, including trainings, are primarily provided by under-resourced NGOs and faith-based organisations. These actors face significant capacity and access limitations, which hinder their ability to effectively address the scale of trafficking.240 NGOs and international organisations offer varied reintegration trainings, such as business or entrepreneurship skills development. As noted by Dr Adeyinka, while the training is a very good initiative, the financial barriers remain a major challenge. Participants often cannot afford transport or food during multi-week programmes, especially when reimbursements are delayed. NAPTIP provides live-in training options for individuals residing in its shelters, arranging transportation to and from the training location, while some NGOs provide daily allowances. However, most victims still face cost-related obstacles. The same source added that ‘even when reintegration support is provided, it can come with its own complications.’ For instance, a returnee might be helped by an EU-funded IOM programme or NCFRMI to set up a business, but instead of using the proceeds for themselves, some are forced to give the money to traffickers to finally be free of their debt. ‘So, they are left with nothing, forced to start from scratch again.’ 241

Limited availability of psychosocial and social support services in Nigeria poses a major challenge, especially given the severity of the psychosocial impact many victims have experienced. Psycho-social support training is often not covered by reintegration programmes,

‘reinforcing perceptions that it is less important than economic assistance.’242 Some shelters have staff trained in psychological first aid and trauma counselling; however, Nigeria’s mental health system remains under-resourced. Training on disability inclusion varies across regions and NGOs, while access to specialised services - such as those for individuals with intellectual disabilities - is still relatively limited.243

- 204

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- 243

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