

REINTEGRATION AMONG SURVIVORS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

LEARNING FROM WOMEN WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE IN NIGERIA

FREE THE SLAVES

Emmanuel World CHILDREN FOUNDATION

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Key Findings

Economic empowerment is critical but insufficient on its own.

Vocational training, start-up equipment, and financial literacy were identified as key contributors to successful reintegration because they enable survivors to generate sustainable livelihoods and reduce vulnerability to re-trafficking. However, survivors and service providers repeatedly stressed that economic interventions alone do not guarantee successful reintegration. Their effectiveness depends on survivors' mental well-being, physical health, and access to broader support systems.

Mental health is a foundational determinant of reintegration success.

Psychological trauma emerged as one of the most significant factors shaping reintegration outcomes. Survivors described how depression, anxiety, trauma, and what some referred to as a persistent “mindset of exploitation” can prevent individuals from engaging with training opportunities, sustaining employment, or rebuilding relationships. Mental healthcare was therefore viewed not as an optional service but as a prerequisite for benefiting from other reintegration interventions.

Reintegration is strengthened by stability, belonging, and supportive relationships.

Safe housing, family support, peer support, and trusted relationships with social workers were consistently identified as important sources of stability and protection. Support networks reduce isolation, foster resilience, and help survivors navigate practical challenges during recovery. Where family support is absent, peer networks and service providers often play a critical compensatory role.

Continuity of support is as important as the support itself.

A recurring finding across survivor interviews was the importance of long-term and reliable engagement from service providers. Participants highlighted that fragmented, short-term, or inconsistent interventions can undermine progress, erode trust, and increase vulnerability to re-exploitation. Successful reintegration was associated with sustained accompaniment, regular follow-up, and the fulfillment of commitments made to survivors.

Key Findings



Stigma and discrimination remain major barriers to reintegration.

Many respondents reported that judgment, rejection, and social exclusion are major challenges for survivors upon returning to their communities. Stigma affects access to employment opportunities, weakens self-confidence, strains family relationships, and contributes to social isolation. Survivors viewed stigma as one of the principal obstacles preventing them from rebuilding their lives and achieving full reintegration.



Physical freedom does not necessarily translate into psychological freedom.

The research found that some survivors continue to experience forms of psychological entrapment long after leaving situations of exploitation. Unresolved trauma, internalized shame, and enduring emotional attachment to exploitative environments can limit survivors' ability to take advantage of reintegration opportunities and, in some cases, contribute to re-trafficking.



The findings point toward a relational model of reintegration support.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that successful reintegration is not produced by any single intervention. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between health and recovery services, supportive relationships, stable housing, economic empowerment, and sustained accompaniment over time. These components reinforce one another and collectively contribute to dignity, autonomy, social inclusion, and resilience against future exploitation.



Traditional Outdoor Cooking - Abujar, Nigeria; Credit: Mukhtar Shuaib Mukhtar - Pexels - Canva

Executive Summary

This study explores the factors that shape reintegration outcomes for survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria. Central to the analysis is an understanding of reintegration that is grounded in the perceptions, experiences, knowledge, and aspirations of survivors themselves, thereby prioritizing their voices and emphasizing their agency in defining what reintegration means and how it is achieved. In doing so, the study explores how survivors of sex trafficking define successful reintegration, what forms of support they believe most effectively assist individuals like themselves in rebuilding their lives, and what obstacles they identify as having the potential to undermine or disrupt reintegration efforts.

The ultimate objective of the study is to generate a body of evidence that anti-trafficking non-governmental organizations and governmental agencies working with survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria can draw upon to inform and strengthen their work. By documenting survivors' perspectives, experiences, and priorities, the research seeks to support these stakeholders in designing and implementing reintegration programs that are more effective, more survivor-centered, and more responsive to the complex realities shaping reintegration outcomes.

Survivors engaged in this research are women who had been trafficked from Nigeria to the Kédougou region of Senegal, where they were exploited in the informal sex industry surrounding gold-mining sites before being identified, rescued, and repatriated. In addition to survivors, the study also draws on interviews with topical experts, including social workers and government officials working on human trafficking in Nigeria, in order to provide additional perspectives on survivor reintegration practices.

The research finds that successful reintegration is shaped by a combination of mutually reinforcing factors rather than any single intervention. Economic empowerment through vocational training, start-up equipment, and financial literacy emerged as central to rebuilding sustainable livelihoods and reducing vulnerability to re-trafficking. However, survivors consistently emphasized that economic support alone is insufficient. Mental healthcare, physical healthcare, spiritual guidance, and trauma recovery were identified as essential foundations that enable survivors to rebuild confidence, regain autonomy, and engage meaningfully with livelihood opportunities. Safe housing and supportive relationships with family members, friends, social workers, and other survivors further contribute to stability, protection, and social inclusion.

The findings also highlight significant barriers to reintegration. Shame, stigma, and discrimination — particularly for women who have experienced sexual exploitation — continue to restrict social and economic opportunities and can increase vulnerability to re-exploitation. Enduring trauma and psychological entrapment may further hinder recovery by affecting survivors' self-perception, relationships, and ability to move beyond their trafficking experiences.

Across all domains, continuity of support emerged as a critical enabling condition. Survivors repeatedly stressed that long-term engagement, reliable follow-up, and the fulfillment of commitments help sustain progress, while fragmented or short-term interventions can undermine recovery. Taken together, these findings point toward a relational model of reintegration support in which recovery, stability, social connection, and economic empowerment are interconnected and should be addressed through integrated, survivor-centered, and long-term approaches.

Building on these findings, the research offers a series of actionable recommendations for reintegration service providers, government and public authorities, donors and funding agencies, employers and the private sector, communities and families.



Survivor reintegration training at Emmanuel World Children Foundation, Nigeria, Credit: @EWCF

Introduction

In the response to human trafficking, reintegration — meant as the condition in which survivors re-establish their place in society while also achieving emotional stability, social acceptance, and economic independence (International Organization for Migration, 2022) — constitutes a critical yet often misunderstood and under-resourced component of survivor protection and support programming.

However, without effective reintegration programs, survivors are likely to return to the same conditions that made them vulnerable to exploitation in the first place, such as poverty and economic insecurity, lack of education and information, gender inequality and discrimination, social exclusion and marginalization, unsafe migration pathways, family instability, and violence. Under such circumstances, the risk of re-trafficking is alarmingly high (IOM, 2010). Survivors of human trafficking may also experience long-lasting consequences such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, dissociation, fear, sexually transmitted diseases, and physical disabilities resulting from the violence and abuse suffered. In the absence of comprehensive reintegration programs, these psycho-social, medical, and emotional challenges can significantly impair survivors' ability to rebuild their lives in freedom, safety, and dignity (Surtees, 2013).

For these reasons, reintegration is widely recognized as essential to preventing re-trafficking, fostering sustainable resilience, and restoring survivors' well-being after exploitation. Understanding the factors that determine successful reintegration and gaining evidence-based insights into successful reintegration programs is thus fundamental to strengthen anti-trafficking efforts. While short-term interventions such as rescue, emergency shelter, and immediate care tend to be prioritized by donors, governments, and service providers, there is a clear need to shift from focusing solely on immediate recovery to also supporting long-term reintegration (Stephen-Smith, 2007; Besrup, 2016).

Moving from these considerations, this study explores the challenges and opportunities associated with the effective reintegration of survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria, focusing on women who were trafficked for sexual exploitation to Senegal's Kédougou region and subsequently rescued and repatriated to Nigeria. While Nigerian authorities have taken important steps to address human trafficking, it is reported that women trafficked in and outside the country continue to receive inadequate support to reintegrate into Nigerian society (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Idemudia et al., 2021).

More specifically, the research aims to define what constitutes successful reintegration for survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria, identify the factors shaping reintegration outcomes, and generate evidence-based recommendations for governmental and non-governmental actors. By centering survivors' lived experiences, the study seeks to inform more survivor-centered — and therefore more effective and sustainable — reintegration strategies.

Gold Mining Camp in the Kédougou Region of Senegal: @Free the Slaves



Survivor Reintegration

The notion of reintegration has no universally accepted definition (Donger and Bhabha, 2018), although many scholars and practitioners draw on the definition developed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which conceptualizes reintegration as the process through which survivors re-establish their place in society by gaining access to essential resources and opportunities, while also achieving emotional stability, social acceptance, and economic independence that support long-term recovery and reduce the risk of re-exploitation (International Organization for Migration, 2022). At the same time, the concept of "reintegration" calls for critical reflection, as it may imply a return to a condition of social inclusion and stability that some survivors of human trafficking may have never fully experienced prior to their exploitation (Idemudia et al., 2021).

Some have also advanced a conceptual distinction between procedural reintegration and substantive reintegration (see in: Idemudia et al., 2021; Besrup, 2016). The former refers to reintegration as a process whereby non-governmental or governmental agencies engage survivors in programs aimed at (re)inserting them in society as active and productive members. The latter understands reintegration as an outcome whereby survivors go through a post-trafficking journey of rehabilitation and recovery that culminates in their capacity to (re)join social, cultural, political, and economic structures with agency, dignity, and purpose.

However it is defined, reintegration is a critical component of the anti-trafficking response, closely linked to the prevention of re-trafficking and re-victimization (Stephen-Smith, 2007; Pennington and Balaram, 2013; Islam & Fay, 2024).

In the absence of effective reintegration support, survivors may be compelled to return to the same structural and individual conditions that made them vulnerable to exploitation in the first place, such as poverty and economic insecurity, lack of education and information, gender inequality and discrimination, social exclusion and marginalization, unsafe migration pathways, family instability, and violence – to mention some of the most prominent. Under those conditions, survivors risk finding themselves trapped in continued cycles of victimization and exploitation.

The risk is even more acute for survivors who return to families or communities that fail to understand what happened to them, stigmatize them, blame them, pressure them to "move on" quickly, or reject them entirely as a reason for shame (Wilson, 2024; Islam & Fay, 2024). Research indicates that families in countries of origin often blame survivors who return home for the perceived failure of their migration projects, especially if the family made a financial investment in the migratory journey, even incurring a debt (Alpes, 2020; Apard et al., 2021).



Conducting family assessment as part of reintegration process of survivors; Photo Credit @EWCF

The dynamics described above are perhaps most evident in the case of women who have been victims of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation. Sex trafficking survivors, in fact, are frequently rejected and shunned by their own families and communities for having been forced to engage in commercial sex (IOM, 2019). Upon returning home, they are often labeled as “sexually abused women” and “prostitutes” and, in some contexts, regarded as a threat to religious norms and cultural life (Islam & Fay, 2024; Mahendra et al., 2001). If they return home with children born while they were trafficked, the added economic burden of a child and the existence of the child as the living proof of illegitimate sexual encounters can result in even more hostile attitudes by family and community members (European Asylum Support Office, 2021). In addition to this, survivors of sex trafficking may often struggle to reconstruct their identities beyond their lived experiences of sexual exploitation, which can reinforce patterns of exclusion and isolation (Chatterjee et al., 2006)

Significantly, human trafficking also causes deep trauma (Abas et al., 2013) that can lead to various mental health disorders, including PTSD, anxiety, depression, dissociation, fear, shame, guilt, and mistrust (Okech et al., 2018). Feelings of worthlessness, loss of identity, and lack of self-esteem are also commonly reported (Aboumrad, 2024). Survivors of human trafficking may also present medical conditions (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases) or physical disabilities (e.g., body injuries) sustained during their exploitation (Altun et al. 2017). Without effective reintegration programs, survivors may struggle to function in their daily life, maintain employment, and cultivate healthy relationships, which may perpetuate cycles of hardship.

As evident from the discussion above, reintegration is critical to prevent re-trafficking, promote sustainable resilience, and restore survivors' long-term well-being after trafficking. However, despite its importance, reintegration remains a relatively under-researched topic.[1] Some of the reasons for this include that reintegration is a long-term process which requires researchers to establish and maintain relationships with survivors over a considerable period of time. Reintegration also involves sensitive and possibly re-traumatizing issues, which requires attentive trauma-informed, survivor-centered methodologies that many researchers are not adequately trained in. The limited space devoted to researching reintegration is also the reflection of a programmatic reality whereby donors, governments, and service providers typically prioritize interventions such as rescue, emergency shelter, and immediate care, which allow for visible and quantifiable outcomes as well as for shorter project cycles.

[1] Notable exceptions include Idemudia et al, 2021; McCarthy, 2018; Kumar Rai, 2025; Okech et al, 2018; Kasper & Chiang, 2020.

Busy Street in Kaduna, Nigeria: Photo Credit Mk-photoz - Pexels - Canva



Objectives

This study aims to define what constitutes successful reintegration for survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria, identify the factors that sustain and the factors that undermine the effective reintegration of survivors, and generate evidence-based recommendations. It focuses on the reintegration experiences of survivors who were trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation from Nigeria to Senegal and were subsequently identified, rescued, and repatriated to their home country. The goal is to derive lessons and learnings that anti-trafficking non-governmental organizations and governmental agencies in Nigeria may then adopt in their work to strengthen their reintegration approaches and programs.

While Nigerian authorities have taken some important steps to address the country's problem of human trafficking, it is reported that women and girls trafficked in and outside Nigeria continue to receive inadequate medical, counseling, and financial support to reintegrate into society (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Idemudia et al., 2021).

<table>
<tr><th>Research Questions</th><th>Research Objectives</th></tr>
<tr><td>What constitutes successful reintegration for survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria?</td><td rowspan="2">Understand how survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria understand reintegration and how they believe reintegration is achieved</td></tr>
<tr><td>What factors shape the reintegration journey of survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria? What contributes to successful reintegration? What undermines reintegration efforts?</td></tr>
<tr><td>What steps should non-governmental organizations and government agencies take to better support survivors towards effective reintegration?</td><td>Support organizations and agencies working with survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria to strengthen their reintegration programs</td></tr>
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Traditional basket weaving in Daura, Nigeria Credit: @Al Ameen Saddiq - Pexels - Canva

Methodology

In this study, we have attempted to prioritize survivors' voices and emphasize their agency in defining what reintegration means and how it is achieved. As noted by well-informed observers, in fact, "if reintegration assistance in Nigeria is to be more effective, [reintegration programs] would need to better reflect the actual experiences of survivors [...]. Privileging the voices of survivors would allow for scarce available reintegration resources to be directed to where they are most needed and ensure these programs are useful to survivors." (Idemudia et al., 2021).

For this research, we carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 women who are survivors of sex trafficking and who previously accessed reintegration assistance in Nigeria.

The activities of rescue, repatriation, and reintegration were initially part of a project funded by the U.S. Department of State/Office of Monitoring and Combating Trafficking in Persons and implemented by the Center on Human Trafficking Research and Outreach at the University of Georgia (CenHTRO), Free the Slaves (FTS), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), La Lumière, and Emmanuel World Children Foundation (EWCF). In three years, the project supported the removal of more than 210 young women from situations of sexual exploitation in gold-mining areas of Kédougou. Currently, the project is continuing through a bi-national initiative led by FTS and implemented together with La Lumière in Senegal and EWCF in Nigeria, also in coordination with Senegal's national mechanism on human trafficking. The current initiative builds on a survivor-informed approach that integrates direct services, community-led prevention, and sustained systems strengthening across both countries.

The interviews were carried out in Akure by a team of three local researchers trained in survivor-centered and trauma-informed research. To ensure conceptual clarity and cultural relevance, the interview questionnaire was co-prepared by an experienced team that included international and local researchers and piloted for effectiveness. The interviews focused on the survivors' reintegration journey, inviting them to reflect on the challenges that they faced upon returning to Nigeria, the forms of support that they received and that proved most helpful, the forms of support that were not available and they wish they had received, and their opinions on how reintegration programs for survivors of sex trafficking could be enhanced.

In addition to survivors, three topical experts including social workers and government officials working on human trafficking in Nigeria were also interviewed to provide an additional perspective on survivor reintegration practices. In the interviews with them, the conversation focused on success stories experienced during their work with survivors, the factors that contributed to the success of those experiences, and considerations on gaps that still exist in the support to survivors for reintegration.

Informed consent was collected from all respondents prior to beginning the interviews. Information related to the research was presented to them in an accessible format and language. As part of the ethical protocol that guided this research, the interviewing team also took care to discuss with each respondent the potential risks of re-traumatization inherent in participation in the research. At the same time, the research team did its best to mitigate the risks of harm to participants, for instance by avoiding any questions that would require survivors to recount their experiences of exploitation in Senegal. Compensation for the time dedicated to the research and reimbursement of transportation costs were also provided to respondents, alongside accommodation and meals.

One limitation of this research is that the focus is restricted to Nigeria. While we believe that several of the findings presented in this report will resonate beyond Nigeria and that many of the recommendations discussed here could be applicable in other contexts as well, the research reports the specific perspectives of women who underwent exploitation in Senegal and went through their reintegration journey in Nigeria. The perspectives of women who experienced trafficking and reintegration in different contexts may be different from those of the respondents interviewed in this research and may lead to different conclusions.

Similarly, another limitation of this research is that it exclusively focuses on women who underwent sexual exploitation. People in Nigeria who have experienced a different type of trafficking — for instance, trafficking for forced labor — may hold different views on the challenges and opportunities for reintegration. Finally, this research purposefully focused on the voices of women. Therefore, the findings of the research reflect the experiences and opinions of female survivors. A more comprehensive study would need to extend the investigation and analysis to survivors of human trafficking who identify across a broader range of gender identities.

Table 2. Demographic information of survivors interviewed for this research

Survivors	Time Since Repatriation	Current Profession	Current Location
1	1.5 year	Hairdresser	Lagos
2	1.5 year	Seamstress	Benin City
3	2.5 years	Seamstress	Onitsha
4	2.5 years	Hairdresser	Ikot Ekpene
5	3.5 years	Clothers Retailer	N/A
6	2 years	Seamstress	Benin City
7	3.5 years	Hairdresser	Lagos
8	2 years	Hairdresser	Umuahia
9	1.5 year	Seamstress	Benin City
10	2.5 years	Food Retailer	N/A

Context

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation and largest economy (Yeboua & Cilliers, 2026). However, it also faces critical challenges such as low literacy levels, limited opportunities for education, widespread unemployment, endemic corruption, gender inequality, inter-ethnic tensions, and conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2025; UNICEF, n.d.; Tuki, 2025). On this background, women and girls — especially those who come from poor and rural backgrounds where poverty, insecurity, and lack of opportunities are most prominent — find themselves vulnerable to unsafe migration, trafficking, and exploitation (Egbejule, 2024).

Human trafficking from Nigeria to Senegal is a significant issue, involving highly organized regional criminal networks (NAPTIP, 2025). Trafficking victims are commonly transported from Nigeria to Benin, onward to Burkina Faso and Mali, before entering Senegal. Others are trafficked from Nigeria through Niger and Mali before reaching Senegal. Travel methods include buses or private vehicles, with forged documents used to evade authorities' controls (United States Department of State, 2024).

Senegal's southeastern gold mining zones, such as Kédougou, serve as primary destinations for trafficked Nigerian women and girls. The gold mining industry has been expanding in Senegal, becoming a cornerstone of the country's economy and attracting migrants seeking economic opportunities (Daffé, 2012). However, the sector's rapid growth — compounded by the remote location of gold mines, weak governmental oversight, and the cultural beliefs that sexual intercourse can improve miners' luck — has also created conditions conducive to human trafficking and sexual exploitation (Bryant et al., 2022). Recent research (Okech et al., 2022) shows that nearly 1 in 5 women engaged in commercial sex in the Kédougou region are victims of sex trafficking and that 68% of sex workers in Kédougou originate from Nigeria.

Gold mining work camp in Kédougou, Senegal Credit: @Free the Slaves



Traffickers capitalize on the socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by women and girls in Nigeria's poorest areas, luring victims with false promises of employment abroad (NAPTIP, 2025). A critical dynamic here is debt bondage, whereby victims are charged for transportation, accommodation, and job placement. Until these debts are repaid, women are controlled by their traffickers, prevented from leaving, and forced into commercial sex (NAPTIP, 2025; Okech et al., 2021). Among sex trafficking victims identified in Kédougou, 57% reported having been forced into sexual acts to repay debts (Cody et al., 2022).

Some traffickers also exploit juju rituals. Often described as a form of "black magic", juju refers to ritual practices present in many West African societies that involve invoking deities or spirits to influence human affairs. It can be used for positive purposes, such as blessings, or for negative purposes, such as curses. In trafficking contexts, victims may be compelled to swear binding oaths before specific deities (Cbanga, 2009) with the belief that violating these oaths will result in severe harm to themselves or their families (Adeyinka et al., 2023). This mechanism fosters profound psychological fear and reinforces a powerful, difficult-to-break bond between victims and traffickers (Nagle & Owasanoye, 2016; Achebe, 2004)

Woman selling oranges in Nigeria; Credit: @Sam Makoji - Getty Images - Canva





Financial transaction, Nigeria**:** Photo Credit @Windstock - Getty Images - Canva

Reintegration in Survivors' Words and Views

Before examining the factors that sustain or undermine reintegration, it is essential to understand how reintegration is defined by those who experience it directly. Centering survivors' voices allows for a more grounded, nuanced understanding of what reintegration truly entails and why it matters. Their perspectives reveal not only the material dimensions of reintegration, but also its social, relational, and psychological significance.

Across interviews, survivors consistently described reintegration in terms of autonomy and self-sufficiency. For some, this meant the ability to meet basic needs independently and regain control over everyday life — "be able to be on my own and feed myself, buy something for myself, do things on my own, and even buy clothes for myself and have some money" (SI_01). Employment and financial independence were closely tied to this sense of dignity and stability, with one participant defining reintegration simply as "being employed so that you can take care of yourself, without relying on anyone else" (SI_06). These accounts highlight how economic empowerment is not merely a practical necessity, but a core component of rebuilding a sense of self, agency, and dignity.

At the same time, reintegration was understood as a relational process of reconnecting with others. Survivors emphasized the importance of belonging, describing reintegration as "getting back to my family, reuniting with my family members and reuniting with my society and community" (SI_05). This reflects the central role that social ties and community acceptance play in restoring a sense of normalcy and inclusion after exploitation.

Beyond economic and social dimensions, survivors also framed reintegration as a form of personal transformation. One participant described it as “being in a place where nobody can tell me what to do anymore because I am learning skills for myself now, and no one will deceive me” (SI_07), underscoring the importance of knowledge, skills, and confidence in preventing further exploitation. Others linked reintegration to a broader sense of empowerment and pride — “being empowered and being very proud that anything I want, I can get it for myself” (SI_02) — or even to a renewed sense of purpose, such as “saving your life and help others to avoid human trafficking” (SI_08).

Taken together, these perspectives show that reintegration is experienced by survivors as a multidimensional process encompassing economic independence, social reconnection, renewed dignity, and personal agency. Listening to survivors’ own definitions not only deepens our understanding of reintegration, but also provides a critical foundation for assessing what enables or hinders it in practice.

Factors that Contribute to Successful Reintegration

In this section, we will discuss the factors that survivors interviewed for this research identified as contributing to successful reintegration: (i) economic stability through vocational training, start-up equipment, and financial literacy, (ii) holistic care through spiritual guidance, mental healthcare, and physical healthcare, (iii) shelter and housing, and (iv) support networks.

Vocational training, start-up equipment, and financial literacy

Women with lived experience of sex trafficking in Nigeria identify vocational training as a critical component of the reintegration process. Vocational training, in fact, helps survivors to achieve economic stability by equipping them with practical skills that increase employability or enable self-employment. Respondents consistently emphasized that training is most effective when it is clearly aligned with sectors that offer realistic income-generating opportunities within the local economy.

The women interviewed for this research, for example, received vocational training in sectors relevant to the Nigerian labor market - some as hairdressers, others as seamstresses or retailers. They were unanimous in noting that learning a profession strengthened their ability to access decent work, make a steady income, and overcome economic marginalization. A few of them also noted that making an income through their new professional activities enabled them to repay debts that they had contracted with family or community members upon embarking on what initially seemed to be a legitimate migration journey.

"Survivors need someone that will teach them a profession, they need to learn something because whatever they learn will give them money and the ability to support themselves." (SI_02)

"When I came back from Senegal, I was getting worried about what I would be doing to survive in Nigeria and how I would be able to take care of myself. Through the reintegration program that I was in, I have acquired skills as a hairdresser and I can now take care of myself." (SI_04)

"If you are a survivor and you are not working, there is a chance that you might become a victim again. Skills training is necessary." (SI_05)

Importantly, the women emphasized that vocational training programs should aim to empower survivors by involving them in decision-making over the specific area where they would like to acquire knowledge and skills and build their professional life. Within those sectors that are best suited to offer income opportunities in the local economy, survivors should have the possibility of expressing their preferences. In the words of a respondent, "forcing a survivor into a certain occupation if she is not interested or doesn't feel talented, will not lead to success" (SI_08). Key informant interviewees also made this point in separate conversations, noting that survivors should be enrolled in a training of their choice that reflects their interests and inclinations (KII_03).

Buffet meal, Nigeria**:** Photo Credit @Osarieme Eweka - Getty Images - Canva



"Some survivors don't have any work experience, don't have any skills or anything else that they can hold on to, so service providers should try to ask them what they want to do with themselves after returning to Nigeria and help them to grow in that field." (SI_03)

However, while vocational training is a critical component of economic stability and successful reintegration, it may not be sufficient on its own. Access to start-up equipment is also needed, enabling survivors to apply their skills and generate income. The women that we spoke with explained that after participating in vocational training programs, they needed sewing machines, hairdressing kits, or small retail supplies to translate their newly acquired skills into real economic opportunities. A woman who was trained as a seamstress told us that after completing the training she had no materials to start working. When the organization that trained her stood up and bought the equipment for her, the transition towards economic stability could truly begin. Other women reported similar stories.

"When we returned back to Nigeria, I acquired hairdresser skill and the organization that trained me opened a shop and bought equipment for me. Since then, my life has changed." (SI_04)

"When I left [the program] they gave us money. That money was enough for me to get at least one sewing machine. So, I got a machine immediately, and I started to work with that one. Later, they told me to look for a shop, and they said that they would pay for the rent. So, I looked for a shop, and they paid the rent, and I started my business." (SI_03)

"Before I have never dreamt that one day I will be having my own equipment, even less that I will be my own boss." (SI_09)

Significantly, key informants with whom we spoke noted that survivors in Nigeria display a high rate of self-employment — a reality which is closely tied to the barriers that survivors encounter in accessing formal employment, particularly discrimination and stigma. This further underscores the importance for survivors of accessing start-up resources and equipment, allowing them to secure sustainable livelihoods despite other obstacles that they may encounter in the labor market.

Besides vocational training and start-up equipment, interviewees added that for economic stability to be real and sustainable, survivors also need to learn how to manage their finances. They need to learn how to save money and how to make informed economic decisions in order to strengthen their capacity to plan for the future, avoid debt, and be alert to the risks of re-exploitation. Counseling was therefore referred to by survivors as being particularly helpful when it also includes sessions on financial management.

"Employment and financial independence are very important for survivors, because if you are a survivor and you don't have any means there are chances that you will meet someone that will link you up with a trafficker again." (SI_07)

"Thanks to the reintegration program of which I was part, today I am a hairdresser. I can take care of myself and my family and I can save money to deal with unexpected needs and expenses. I can take from my savings, I don't need to borrow from anyone, I can buy clothes and anything else with my own money." (SI_08)



Lagos Nigeria; Credit: @Effi from Alamhy - Canva

Spiritual guidance, mental healthcare, and physical healthcare

Successful reintegration is not built on economic stability only. Holistic care through spiritual guidance, mental healthcare, and physical healthcare were described as contributing positively to survivors' reintegration in several ways.

Spiritual guidance can play a meaningful role in the reintegration of survivors of sex trafficking because it addresses dimensions of healing that go beyond material support. Many survivors experience profound violations of trust, dignity, and identity, which can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and loss of meaning and purpose.

Spiritual guidance — which in the context of Nigeria is rooted in local religious traditions — was reported to help survivors rebuild a sense of self-worth and inner peace, offering a framework through which individuals could process trauma, make sense of their experiences, and reconnect with values, beliefs, or sources of hope that sustain long-term recovery.

Some of the survivors that we spoke with referred to prayers as a way to address difficult thoughts and memories connected to their experience with sex trafficking. One survivor, in particular, described spiritual practices as an important way through which survivors can "cope with the demons in their head". In addition, spiritual support was found to foster resilience and a sense of belonging. Survivors are often socially isolated, either due to stigma or disrupted relationships, but participation in spiritual spaces and practices can contribute to feeling seen, accepted, and supported. This sense of community can be crucial in reducing loneliness and reinforcing positive social connections. As such, spiritual guidance can facilitate the rebuilding of trust in others, while empowering survivors to envision a future beyond their past experiences.

"The organization that supported my reintegration would talk with me spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. They helped me, they counseled me a lot, and prayed a lot. I swear those things helped me, they really did a great job. If not for them, I don't know where I would be today." (SI_05)

"Anytime I feel like I need counselling and I need support mentally and spiritually, I call the pastor, and I talk to him, and he counsels me, and I feel good, and I feel happy about it." (SI_09)

The importance of spiritual support was further highlighted by key informants as a way to help survivors regain a sense of autonomy and prevent them from feeling forgotten and abandoned after their return. Key informants also referred to the juju rituals used by traffickers to exert control over their victims to explain why and how spiritual support in a context such as that of Nigeria can be especially helpful.

"When traffickers traffick women and girls abroad, to Senegal, to Benin, to Europe, there are several juju rituals and oaths that they force their victims to take. As a result of this, they use those oaths to control them. When they come back from being trafficked, the only way of breaking those juju and the power that they exert is by prayer and spiritual deliverance. All those things are very important in the process of reintegration." (KII_03)

Similar to spiritual support, the provision of mental healthcare services is identified by survivors as foundational to recovery, autonomy, and long-term reintegration. Upon returning to Nigeria from Senegal, all survivors experienced some form of more or less severe trauma, stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. Without appropriate mental health support, these symptoms can persist and ultimately interfere with daily functioning, relationships, and decision-making. Mental healthcare services — especially trauma-informed therapy — were found to help survivors process these experiences, overcome them, and regain self-esteem and agency.

"When I came back, I was depressed, I was thinking that I don't have anything to do and I don't know what to do, but when I started to receive counseling, things changed for the better." (SI_02)

Survivors also link mental healthcare to greater resilience against re-exploitation: with adequate psychological support, they are better placed to avoid returning to exploitative situations driven by unresolved trauma or a lack of coping mechanisms. Strengthening emotional resilience is therefore seen as a key protective factor.

Additionally, mental wellbeing is seen as key to the success of other reintegration efforts, such as vocational skills training, employment, and social inclusion. A survivor struggling with untreated trauma may find it difficult to participate in training programs, maintain a job, or build healthy relationships. Mental healthcare thus enables survivors to engage more fully in those opportunities. In other words, and as pointed out also by key informants, mental healthcare is central to holistic recovery — without it, other forms of support risk being incomplete or unsustainable.

"I try as much as possible to pay attention to the survivors' mental health, because I think it is a major issue. As service providers we cannot just train the survivors, help them to start a business, or sell something. We need to give attention also to their mental health because someone who is not healed will not go far." (KII_01)

"I believe that for someone that has passed through a lot and has lived through terrifying experiences, psychological support is very important." (KII_03)

Beyond mental and spiritual well-being, survivors noted that a successful reintegration must also encompass access to physical healthcare. Survivors of sex trafficking often return to Nigeria with serious — visible or hidden — impacts on their body. Without proper medical care, these issues can worsen over time and limit their ability to recover. Crucially, medical care must be survivor-centered and trauma-informed to ensure that medical procedures do not re-traumatize individuals.



Idanre Hill, Ondo State, Nigeria; Credit: @Fela Samu - Getty Images - Canva

Sexual and reproductive health is an especially critical area. It is not uncommon for Nigerian survivors of sex trafficking to suffer from sexually transmitted diseases and infections as well as unintended pregnancies and complications from unsafe abortions or unattended births. For this reason, several survivors emphasized the importance of urgent reproductive healthcare. Those who gave birth should also be supported through access to healthcare for their children.

"Survivors need health care support because they are most likely dealing with sickness. There is no way you will come back from Senegal without health challenges because in Senegal there is no hospital where trafficked people can be treated. When survivors come back to Nigeria they need urgent health care support." (SI_02)

"I believe everything is about health, with your good health you can conquer so many things. Service providers should focus on ensuring good health for survivors, after that training and financial support can come." (SI_09)

"Medical care is very important because the medical condition of a survivor has a ripple effect on whatever other service we are providing." (KII_03)

Importantly, what was evident in our conversations with survivors and key informants is that physical health and mental health are deeply interconnected. Untreated medical conditions can worsen psychological distress, while psychological trauma can manifest in physical symptoms. Providing integrated care ensures that survivors are treated holistically rather than in fragmented ways, which sustains long-term wellbeing.

"When survivors are brought back, both mental health and physical health need to be taken care of. Most of the time the reason why this kind of reintegration fails is because they take survivors to the hospital for physical treatment, but then they do not take into consideration their mental health." (KII_02)

Shelter and housing

Although safe housing was mentioned by survivors somewhat less frequently than other factors, it is still regarded as important for successful reintegration. First and most urgently, some participants explained that having access to housing is important because survivors typically return with nothing and need somewhere safe to stay to avoid returning to the same unsafe environments from where they were trafficked in the first place. Relatedly, housing provides renewed stability, as having a stable living arrangement allows survivors to progressively regain a sense of normalcy and predictability.

Safe housing is also critical for psychosocial recovery, since healing from trauma, anxiety, or depression requires an environment where a person feels secure. If someone is worried about their immediate safety, it is extremely difficult to engage in counseling, medical care, or benefit from other support services. In other words, housing is in many ways the foundation for accessing broader reintegration opportunities, as having a stable living situation facilitates survivors in the process of pursuing training, obtaining employment, and accessing healthcare.

Housing Development Abuja, Nigeria; Credit: @Peeterv - Getty Images Signature - Canva



"Survivors need a roof to stay, they need shelter. When they come back from Senegal they do not have anything, they really need housing and shelter." (SI_06)

Although most survivors expressed that having safe housing is important, few went into details on this aspect. Nonetheless, the responses suggest that access to a safe place to stay is an important part of the initial reintegration period.

"For survivors that are unwilling to go back to their respective places, maybe as a result of stigma or as a result of adverse circumstances, we provide shelters where they can stay and learn whatever they want to learn - and I think that this is very important for the success of a reintegration program." (KII_03)



Lagos, Nigeria; Credit: @Peeterv - Getty Images Signature - Canva

Support networks

Participants in this research discussed the importance of support networks for a successful reintegration. Key informants also reinforced the survivors' voices on the importance of support networks, noting that survivors who can access those kinds of spaces are better placed to go through successful reintegration experiences.

Primarily, support networks were reported to reduce survivors' isolation. Victims of human trafficking are typically cut off from family, friends, and communities during exploitation. After returning home, survivors may easily feel alone, stigmatized, or misunderstood. Having trusted and supportive people around them — be it friends, family members, or social workers — provides a sense of belonging and reassurance that they are not alone in their recovery.

"My mum is there, you know when your family loves you, it really makes a difference. When I came back [to Nigeria] she didn't ask me all those questions that could make me feel bad and ashamed, she was just there for me. In my family they were all happy when they saw me back. Even if they didn't have anything to support me financially, the happiness really moved me and encouraged me. " (SI_03)

Support networks also act as a protective factor against re-exploitation. People with strong, reliable social connections are generally less vulnerable to manipulation and coercion. Trusted individuals can offer guidance, help identify risks, and provide practical support during moments of instability or crisis.

"When I was in Senegal, I had no friends and nobody to talk to, but when I got back to Nigeria, I found my people and we are connecting well and it really makes me peaceful and I have peace of mind now." (SI_03)

In addition, support networks help survivors navigate complex systems and access services. Recovering from trafficking often involves interacting with healthcare providers, legal systems, housing services, and employment programs. Support networks — especially those involving case managers or community organizations — can help survivors understand their options, advocate for their rights, and stay engaged with services.

Within support networks, family support was found to play an especially important role in reintegration. Some survivors explained that having a close relationship with their family and receiving their support allowed them to adjust more easily upon return. One survivor shared that she would have felt even more lost if she did not have her family's support when returning to Nigeria. However, not all survivors received support from their families. When that was the case, peers and social workers provided valuable alternative support structures. Peer support, in particular, was found to be powerful because it connects individuals with others who have lived similar experiences, ensuring access to spaces free from shame and stigma.

Sustaining or Undermining Survivor Reintegration in Nigeria

START-UP EQUIPMENT to help survivors apply their new skills and set up an economic activity - espcially when stigma and marginalizaton obstruct access to employed jobs

VOCATIONAL TRAINING in an area of interest to the survivor and in a sector of relevance to the local economy to provide survivors with new knowledge and skills

FINANCIAL LITERACY to ensure that survivors make well-informed and aware economic decisions

ECONOMIC STABILITY

PHYSICAL HEALTHCARE - especially important for survivors of sex trafficking and for survivors returning to Nigeria with children

SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE for survivors who value spirituality

MENTAL HEALTHCARE to address trauma, anxiety, depression and other harmful effects of sex tafficking on survivors

HOLISTIC CARE

SHELTER & HOUSING to avoid returning to unsafe environments and provide conditions necessary to access other forms of reintegration support through access to safe and stable accommodations

SUPPORT NETWORKS - be it friends, family members, or social workers to create safe spaces. Peer support is especially key to survivors without family support as well as to connect survivors with people who share the same lived experience

Sustain

REINTEGRATION

Undermine

SHAME, STIGMA & DISCRIMINATION which are especially acute for women with lived experience of sexual exploitation. Negative stereotypes and assumptions are prevalent at the family and community levels

DISCONTINUITY OF SUPPORT, which can obstruct cotinuous engagement, disrupt progress and undermine motivation

ENDURING TRAUMA, which affects how survivors see themselves (e.g., unworthy of a dignified life, blame holders) and how survivors interact with others (e.g., lack of trust or uncapbale to escape unhealthy relations)

PSYCHOLOGICAL ENTRAPMENT which prevents some survivors from leaving their experience of sexual exploitation behind and risks pushing them towards repeated cycles of unsafe migration to Senegal and re-trafficking

PSYCHOLOGICAL HARMS

Factors That Undermine Successful Reintegration

In this section we will discuss the factors that women interviewed for this research identified as challenging survivors' reintegration journey in Nigeria - (i) shame, stigma and discrimination, (ii) psychological harms such as enduring trauma and psychological entrapment, (iii) discontinuity of support.

Shame, stigma, and discrimination

Survivors of sex trafficking that we interviewed for this research were unanimous in saying that shame and stigma can be major barriers to successful reintegration because they affect how survivors see themselves, how others treat them, and whether the vulnerability to exploitation that existed in the first place can be overcome.

Many survivors face judgment, discrimination, or rejection from people around them because of their trafficking experience. In many cases, survivors return to communities and families that do not fully understand what happened to them or blame them for their trafficking. Even subtle disapproval — like constant questioning, distrust, or avoidance — can make survivors feel unwelcome or unsafe. These patterns of stigmatization can prevent survivors from participating in social, educational, or economic activities, limiting reintegration. They can also push survivors to leave their homes or to isolate themselves, removing an important layer of social and emotional support that is essential for reintegration.

"The main challenge was at first it was not easy to fit in the society because people think that when you go to Senegal, you are doomed, you are useless, worthless. They make you feel less of yourself, they make you feel like you don't amount to anything . So it was so hard to fit into the society, that was a very big challenge for me." (SI_05)

For survivors of sex trafficking, stigma and marginalization can be even worse, especially when their own family and community look at them as reasons for shame. The women with whom we spoke explained that throughout Nigeria communities often carry assumptions or stereotypes about survivors of sexual exploitation, treating them as "tainted" or morally "at fault." As a result, survivors may find themselves excluded from community events, religious institutions, or workplaces. Dramatically, stigma can even extend to healthcare workers, social service providers, or law enforcement agents, who often meet survivors with judgmental attitudes, slow or substandard service, or outright denial of support.

"Upon returning to Nigeria, I was like 'How am I going to fit in society?' 'How am I going to go into my community?' 'What are the things people will say to me?' 'How will people look at me? As a prostitute?' 'Will people see me as a useless person that cannot make it in life?' That was my biggest fear then. My family was expecting something big from me and now I am here empty handed...." (SI_06)

When this is compounded by internalized shame, survivors' capacity to rebuild their lives in freedom and dignity is seriously undermined. Survivors, in fact, often carry intense feelings of guilt, blame, or embarrassment. This internalized shame can make it hard for survivors to assert their rights, seek help, or pursue opportunities like education, employment, or social connections. It can also lead to self-isolation, depression, and self-harm.

"My family was expecting me to bring certain things, like money, and when I got home, I didn't come home with anything. They were all disappointed in me." (SI_02)

"The family hardly ever understands what a survivor has been through. The family puts pressure, stress, anxiety on the survivor by asking them why they failed to bring money, to take care of the family. And that is where most survivors go back to Senegal." (SI_06)

"I was really scared that I was going home empty-handed and bringing shame to my parents that I left Senegal without anything." (SI_03)

Worryingly, when survivors feel ostracized, there is a real risk that they may once again become vulnerable to coercion, manipulation, or re-trafficking. Lack of social acceptance can make the traffickers' promises of escape, care, or income seem appealing. This was also confirmed by key informants, who talked about the role that societal stigma towards survivors in Nigeria — especially female survivors of sex trafficking — plays in obstructing reintegration.

"A major challenge that survivors face is being accepted back into society. People believe that once a woman is trafficked and forced into sexual exploitation, she will always be a 'prostitute'. They don't see them as the victims of something horrific. They tell them that they are the ones that wanted to travel out of the country and that they were sleeping around. They don't really understand that the person was trafficked." (KII_01)

Enduring trauma and psychological entrapment

Persistent trauma was identified by survivors as a major challenge affecting reintegration. Because trafficking often involves manipulation, coercion, and abuse by people who may have initially appeared trustworthy, enduring trauma can disrupt trust and relationships, shaping a situation where survivors struggle to trust others. Even well-meaning individuals — such as social workers, healthcare providers, or employers — may be perceived as potential threats. This can lead to reluctance to disclose needs, avoidance of services, or disengagement from support programs.

At the same time, some survivors may experience the opposite pattern, whereby they find it difficult to recognize safe versus unsafe relationships. Because coercion and control may have been normalized, exploitative dynamics can feel familiar, while healthy relationships may feel unfamiliar or even uncomfortable. This can increase vulnerability to harmful relationships following repatriation.

"Because survivors have a lot on their memory, some of them don't get out of that mindset and will not mind going back to Senegal. Some survivors unfortunately will go back because they have the mentality of exploitation and they cannot get out of it." (SI_02)

"Some survivors will want to go back to Senegal or to another country where they were trafficked because their minds are still over there. One of us that we came back together with was enrolled in a vocational skill training and even given all the necessary things she needed to start the business. Then one day she called me and told me that she sold all that was given to her and that she left the country. Sadly, her mind was still back there, in Senegal. She never became free in her mind." (SI_07)

Lagos, Nigeria; Credit: @Toni Tella - Pexels - Canva



Enduring trauma also deeply affects how survivors see themselves. Sex trafficking typically involves sustained psychological abuse, including humiliation, degradation, and blame. Over time, these messages can become internalized, leading survivors to believe they are at fault or inherently unworthy. These internalized beliefs can shape behavior in powerful ways. For example, survivors may feel undeserving of help or success, leading them to avoid opportunities. A damaged sense of self can also make it harder to assert boundaries and exercise autonomy. Survivors may struggle to say no, advocate for their needs, or leave situations that feel harmful.

In addition, trafficking often disrupts a person's sense of identity and life trajectory. Survivors may feel that their trafficking experience defines them and they may struggle to imagine a future beyond the exploitation they experienced. This can lead to psychological entrapment, to a sense of being "stuck" in exploitation and disconnected from previous aspirations, roles, or relationships. Survivors with whom we spoke reported several cases of women who underwent sex trafficking in Senegal and who ultimately proved unable to move forward — even when repatriated to Nigeria and provided with support to rebuild their lives, their incapacity to stop seeing themselves as "sex trafficking objects" prevented them from taking advantage of those opportunities. For some of them, the refusal to "leave Senegal behind them" was so intense that they ended up being re-trafficked to Kédougou.

One of the key informants with whom we spoke even mentioned the Stockholm syndrome condition to explain the complex psychological mechanism that, if unseen and unaddressed, may ultimately bring survivors back to the hands of their traffickers.

"Psychological trauma also can be a big challenge for survivors. Someone that has been to a country like that [Senegal] and has been trafficked for prostitution and has passed through maltreatment and molestation and all that stuff…you know coming back to Nigeria she will be traumatised, that trauma can also be a big challenge." (SI_05)

"Due to what they have seen in Senegal and the things that they have gone through, survivors have a trauma. Some of them are really not stable mentally. That kind of person even if you give them millions of Naira they will not use them for anything, they might waste it or lose it or even drop it. So, they need support first to deal with their trauma and overcome it." (SI_03)



Shoemaker - Kano, Nigeria; Credit: @Kings Studio - Pexels - Canva

Discontinuity of support

The survivors interviewed in this research noted that discontinuity and unreliability of support can undermine successful reintegration, explaining that when support systems are fragmented, short-term, or unpredictable, they can compromise progress towards reintegration.

When key reintegration services such as mental health care, medical health care, and vocational training are interrupted — for example due to funding gaps, program timelines, or staff turnover — survivors may find themselves exposed to situations of vulnerability that put them at risk of re-exploitation. Similar observations were also made by key informants who acknowledged the risks that discontinuous reintegration programs can pose to survivors. In the words of one of them, "whatever success you achieve you suppose to have follow up in order to have sustainable success."

Inconsistency in support can also disrupt progress and motivation, meaning that interruptions can generate frustration and break positive momentum, making it harder for survivors to sustain engagement and believe in the possibility of long-term change. Expanding on this, survivors noted that discontinuity can undermine trust in service providers. Many survivors already struggle with trust due to their experiences of deception and exploitation. When support is inconsistent — for instance, when services end abruptly — it can reinforce suspicion and distrust, pushing survivors away from service providers and reintegration programs altogether.

"Survivors need follow up even if they are empowered, because everybody has their own challenges. Service providers need to follow up so that the person can even explain what he/she is going through at the moment. That follow up is very important so that survivors will not feel as if they have been forgotten." (SI_03)

Several survivors, thus, mentioned the importance for service providers of fulfilling promises made during the reintegration process, noting that when promised support is not provided, it negatively affects reintegration. One survivor further commented that hope does not come from promises themselves but from seeing them respected — on the way from Senegal to Nigeria, survivors are promised that they will be given the support necessary to rebuild their lives, but until that support materializes one cannot feel any happiness or relief. Two other survivors similarly described feeling empowered and excited when the organization that helped them to reintegrate stood by its word.

"If the promises made to the survivors are not kept and nothing of what had been promised is done, then I don't think the reintegration will be successful." (SI_07)

"When the service providers don't call for regular meetings and what they promised is not fulfilled there cannot be space for successful reintegration." (SI_08)

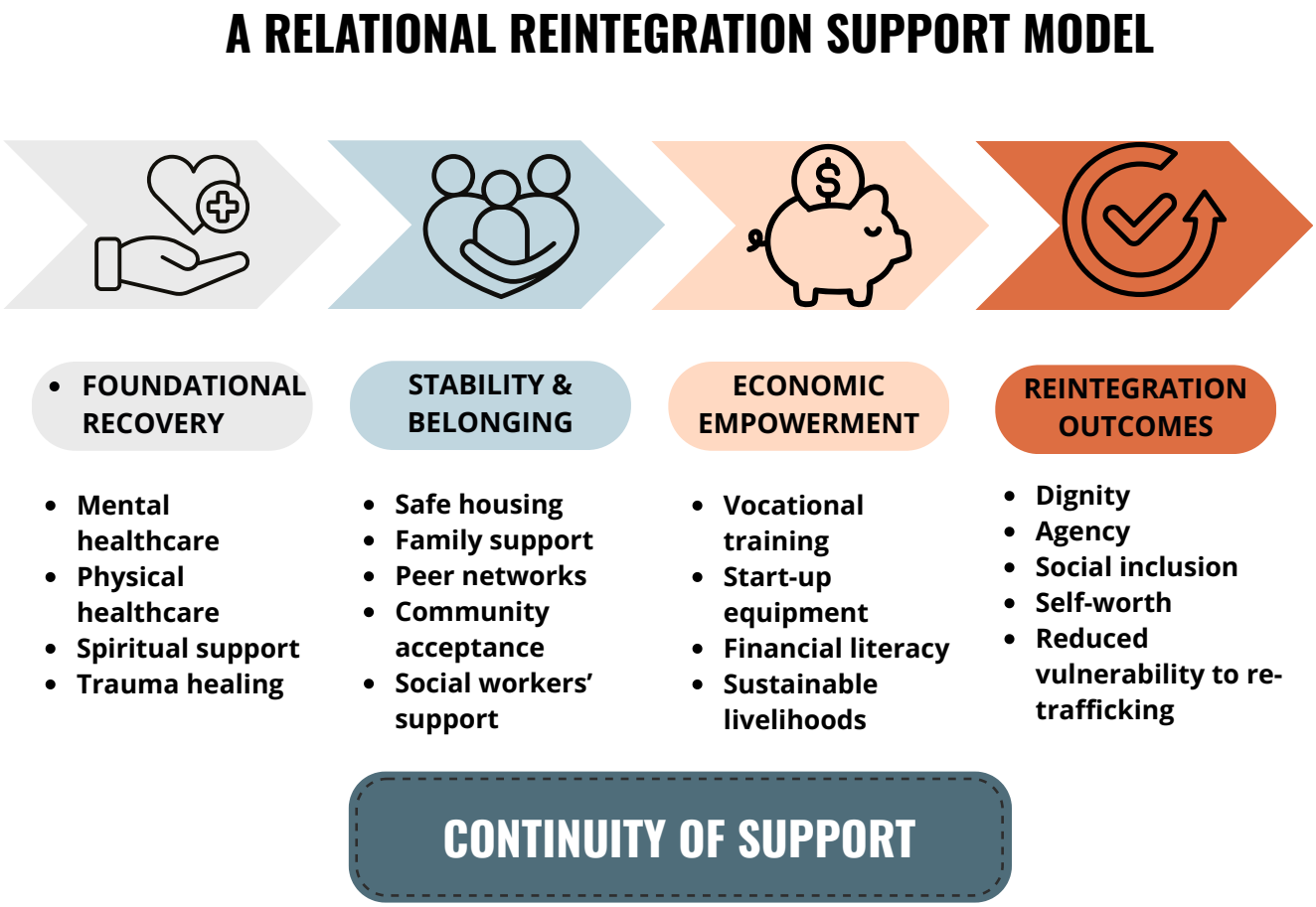
"Some survivors upon returning back to Nigeria were promised that they would be equipped, trained, and educated but then they didn't see any of these things, didn't hear from them. That alone can be a big challenge for survivors and it can make them re-trafficked." (SI_10)

Another key issue is the risk of retraumatization. Repeatedly having to explain one's experiences to new providers, or facing sudden withdrawal of support, can trigger distress and emotional fatigue. This is particularly harmful for individuals experiencing trauma-related conditions such as stress disorder, where predictability and safety are crucial for healing.

Discussion & Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight that economic stability is a cornerstone of reintegration. This is primarily achieved through vocational training and relevant start-up equipment, which together create pathways to sustainable livelihoods and reduce the risk of re-exploitation. Besides improving material conditions, these interventions also contribute to restoring survivors' sense of agency and self-worth. The evidence further reveals that this kind of economic support is most effective when accompanied by financial literacy training, which enables survivors to translate assistance into longer-term independence. It is also critical that vocational programs are viable in the local economic context and aligned with survivors' own interests, skills, and aspirations.

Figure 2. A relational reintegration support model for survivors of sex trafficking in Nigeria



At the same time, the findings make clear that reintegration extends far beyond economic well-being. Survivors' accounts consistently point to the importance of mental healthcare, spiritual support, and access to medical services. Unaddressed psychological distress and untreated physical conditions can significantly undermine participation in reintegration programs and perpetuate cycles of vulnerability. Conversely, when holistic care is provided, survivors are well positioned to join training, maintain employment, and rebuild relationships. Safe housing and social networks — be those with friends, families, other survivors, or service providers — further reinforce this process by providing stability, protection, and a sense of belonging. Together, these elements constitute an ecosystem of care in which each dimension strengthens the others.

The research also identifies several persistent barriers that can disrupt reintegration pathways. Shame and stigma — particularly acute for women who have experienced sexual exploitation and for women who return with children — restrict social and economic opportunities and often contribute to isolation, thereby increasing vulnerability to re-trafficking. Alongside this, enduring trauma and psychological entrapment, described by one survivor as "being stuck in the mindset of exploitation", can prevent individuals from fully engaging in reintegration processes, as physical freedom does not automatically translate into psychological recovery. A further critical barrier is the discontinuity of support, meaning that without sustained engagement from service providers even well-designed interventions risk failing.

Beyond identifying these sustaining and undermining factors, the research also points to a broader relational understanding of reintegration. Survivors consistently described reintegration not as a linear outcome of discrete interventions, but as an evolving process shaped by the interaction between recovery, social support, economic empowerment, and stability. Progress in one domain frequently enables progress in others — improved mental well-being enhances survivors' capacity to engage in training, stable housing creates the security necessary to pursue (self-)employment opportunities, and supportive relationships strengthen resilience and confidence. Conversely, setbacks in any single domain risk having cascading effects across others, weakening overall reintegration outcomes.

Within this relational framework, continuity of support emerges as a central enabling condition. Survivors repeatedly emphasized that sustained engagement, consistent follow-up, and predictable service provision are essential for maintaining trust, motivation, and long-term progress. In contrast, fragmented or time-limited interventions risk disrupting recovery processes and undermining gains achieved in other areas. Taken together, the evidence suggests that reintegration is best understood as a holistic and relational process in which economic, psychological, social, and material dimensions are deeply interdependent.

This provisional model offers a useful framework for future research and programming, particularly in testing its transferability and refinement across different trafficking contexts and geographic settings.



Traditional drummer playing in Abuja, Nigeria Credit: @Shesunze Shamaye - Pexels - Canva

Recommendations

Building on the findings presented above, the research concludes with a series of actionable recommendations and practical tips designed for service providers working on the reintegration of survivors in Nigeria, government and public authorities, donors and funding agencies, employers and private sector actors, communities and families.

For Service Providers

1. **Adopt a survivor-centered approach to reintegration pathways.** Involve survivors in decisions about reintegration journeys (e.g., vocational training) and respect individual preferences, pace, and priorities.

2. **Provide comprehensive support and tools towards economic stability.** Provide vocational training that is market-relevant and aligned with survivors' interests and talents. Ensure that training is paired with start-up equipment or with a clear pathway to entry into formal employment. Support survivors in transitioning from short-term assistance to long-term financial independence through training on budgeting, saving, and basic business management.

3. **Support holistic healing, including spiritual needs, mental health, and healthcare.** Provide trauma-informed mental healthcare throughout reintegration. Acknowledge the role of spirituality for survivors who value it, and integrate it respectfully into care. Provide timely physical healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health services.

4 **Strengthen support networks.** Promote peer support and survivor networks, especially for those survivors who cannot count on their families' support. Ensure case workers or social workers maintain regular contact with survivors.

5 **Ensure continuity and reliability of support.** Provide consistent follow-up and long-term engagement. Fulfill commitments made to survivors and communicate transparently about any changes to avoid affecting trust.

6 **Tailor reintegration support to individual needs and circumstances.** Recognize that survivors have different priorities, aspirations, and pathways to recovery and ensure flexibility in program design and delivery.

7 **Build trust through transparent and realistic communication.** Set clear expectations about available support and ensure that commitments made to survivors can be fulfilled.

8 **Recognize reintegration as a long-term and non-linear process.** Design programs that allow for different trajectories of recovery and provide support that adapts to survivors' evolving needs over time.

Daura, Nigeria Credit: @Ajidox - Pexels - Canva



For Government and Public Authorities

9 **Provide safe and stable housing.** Ensure immediate access to shelter for survivors who have no safe place to return to. Support transitions to longer-term housing solutions that enable stability and independence.

10 **Address stigma and related structural barriers.** Implement community sensitization and awareness campaigns to reduce stigma. Engage employers and communities to expand social and economic opportunities for survivors.

11 **Promote long-term and coordinated reintegration programming,** including transition planning, sustained follow-up, and strong referral mechanisms to ensure continuity of support and prevent gaps in services.

Donor and Funding Agencies

12 **Provide multi-year, flexible funding.** Recognize that recovery and social and economic reintegration often extend beyond the lifespan of typical project cycles and that longer funding horizons enable service providers to offer consistent support, adapt interventions to survivors' evolving needs, and build trusting relationships that are critical to successful reintegration.

13 **Support comprehensive reintegration packages rather than isolated interventions.** Funding mechanisms should encourage holistic programming that address multiple dimensions of reintegration rather than focusing on single components in isolation.

14 **Recognize reintegration as a long-term process requiring sustained investment, and evaluate program success accordingly.** Funding priorities and monitoring frameworks should account for the fact that survivors may experience setbacks, changing needs, and varying timelines.

Employers & the Private Sector

15 **Implement non-discriminatory and stigma-free hiring and workplace practices,** to reduce bias against survivors of trafficking or forced labor. This includes fostering a workplace culture that prioritizes dignity, confidentiality and respect.

16 **Ensure safe, decent, and rights-respecting working conditions,** including adherence to labor standards, fair wages, and reasonable working hours. This is particularly important given survivors' heightened vulnerability to re-exploitation in precarious labor environments.

17 **Partner with reintegration service providers to create structured employment pathways,** such as apprenticeships, internships, on-the-job training, and supported employment schemes. These partnerships can help bridge the gap between vocational training programs and employment outcomes.

18 **Contribute to skills recognition and workforce development.** For example, recognize prior training from reintegration programs, participate in certification schemes, or co-develop training curricula that align with labor market needs.

Communities and Families

19 **Promote acceptance and non-discrimination toward survivors.** Ensure that individuals returning to their families or communities are treated with dignity and are not blamed, ostracized, or re-traumatized because of their exploitation experience.

20 **Provide emotional and practical support within families,** including listening without judgment, rebuilding trust gradually, and offering day-to-day assistance where possible (e.g., childcare, housing support, or accompaniment to services).

21 **Encourage safe and respectful reintegration environments,** including preventing gossip, harassment, or social exclusion that may expose survivors to secondary harm or push them back into vulnerability.

22 **Promote positive narratives around recovery and reintegration,** helping shift community perceptions from blame and stigma toward understanding reintegration as a process of resilience and recovery.

Traffic in Lagos Nigeria. Credit: @peeterv - Getty images - Canva





Ikoye Bridge - Lagos, Nigeria Credit: @James Enyi - Getty Images - Canva

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Image 26. A view of Kathmandu from Swayambhunath Stupa. Credit: @Free the Slaves

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