

2.2.8. Social attitude towards returnee victims of trafficking

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Returnees often face stigma[244] from both family and the wider community, resulting in a hostile environment. In some cases, stigma is coupled with the financial burden of repaying debts, which can make safe resettlement in their home communities difficult or even impossible.[245]

Family attitudes towards returnees vary widely. Some welcome them with compassion and recognise them as victims of crime, particularly in more informed or urban settings. Others, however, reject or disown them to avoid communal shame, blaming them for leaving or for 'bringing shame' through experiences of rape or sexual exploitation. In some cases, returnees are sent away to live elsewhere.[246]

Male returnees - often trafficked for forced labour or petty crime - may face less sexual stigma than women but are still ridiculed as failures or criminals. Male survivors of sexual exploitation often remain silent due to extreme[247] and deep-rooted stigma and a lack of adequate support. Prevailing gender norms discourage men from expressing vulnerability or acknowledging trauma, resulting in many cases going unreported and unaddressed. The consequences of this neglect can be serious. There have been reports of male returnees taking their own lives, while others have been re-recruited into criminal activity, including robbery.[248]

Women face harsher stigma (especially around 'sexual shaming, marriageability, and respectability), which often manifests as social shaming, gossip, and moral judgment directed at survivors. Many returnees from abroad are labelled as sex workers, viewed as having brought dishonour to their families, and are culturally excluded from being considered suitable for marriage.[249] Such stigma also negatively affects their access to employment.[250] In the Nigerian socio-cultural context, high expectations are placed on individuals living abroad. When returnees, especially women, fail to meet these expectations, they may face resentment, alienation, and even rejection from their families. These culturally driven expectations place added pressure on returnees, contributing to psychological trauma, hindering sense of belonging and their social reintegration.[251]

Dr Adeyinka noted that 'there is persistent and culturally embedded stigma surrounding sex in Nigerian society.' The academic reported that many trafficked women she interviewed were raped, got pregnant and returned to Nigeria with a baby, but they could not disclose that the

child was conceived through rape, as the stigma attached to it could ruin both their lives. Instead, ‘they must constantly lie, saying the father is in Libya or has left them.’ Many victims fear that sharing such experiences could later be used against them during conflicts or disputes. The same source added that ‘this complex situation, where families may depend on returnees for support while simultaneously stigmatising them, shows the contradictory social dynamics surrounding reintegration.’252

Survivors must navigate both social rejection and strong cultural expectations around family loyalty. As explained by Dr Adeyinka, based on findings of her joint research study,253 even after being trafficked by their own parents, victims continued to send financial support to those same family members. ‘This reflects a deeply ingrained cultural obligation to honour and support family, regardless of past harm.’ Even when returnees achieve financial success, the stigma may still persist. Individuals who return through forced means often come back empty-handed. In cases where families have taken loans to fund the migration or entered into financial agreements with traffickers, the return results in deeper economic hardship. The burden of repayment falls on the returnees, who are under pressure to find ways to repay debts, often without any resources or support.254 The Director at Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), 255 Morenike Omaiboje, informed that they documented cases in which four families had confined their returning relatives - either siblings or children - upon their arrival. In three other instances, particularly involving siblings, returnees were pressured to repay the money their relatives had contributed towards their initial departure.256

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  Uzomah, N. L. et al., Navigating the Complexities of Return Migration and Reintegration, 2024, url, p. 15; Adeyinka S., online interview with EUAA, 16 July 2025

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  Adeyinka S., online interview with EUAA, 16 July 2025

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  Omaiboje M., email communication with EUAA, 8 July 2025

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  Omaiboje M., email communication with EUAA, 8 July 2025

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  Senior representative at NCFRMI, online interview with EUAA, 6 August 2025

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  Omaiboje M., email communication with EUAA, 8 July 2025

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Uzomah, N. L. et al., Navigating the Complexities of Return Migration and Reintegration, 2024, url, p. 15

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  Adewumi, S., Negotiating access and belonging, 8 May 2024, url, pp. 18-20

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  Adeyinka S., online interview with EUAA, 16 July 2025

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  Derluyin I., et al., ChildMove: The impact of flight experiences on the psychological wellbeing of unaccompanied refugee minors, Ghent University, 2022, url

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  Adeyinka S., online interview with EUAA, 16 July 2025

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  The Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON) is an NGO with headquarters in Lagos, providing support to women survivors of violence and trafficking, including returnees. See WOCON, About us, n.d., url

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  Omaiboje M., email communication with EUAA, 8 July 2025

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