

RETURN AND REINTEGRATION



Tool 7.3 Understanding the challenges for returnee victims of trafficking

Overview

This tool provides a brief overview of some of the challenges which victims face in returning to their country of origin.

Returning to their country of origin is often a difficult process for victims of trafficking, in which they face psychological, family-related, health, legal and financial problems and problems in reintegrating into their families and communities. Reintegration assistance, with a view to empowering victims in their State of origin, should be an integral part of voluntary return programmes. It can help address the root causes of trafficking and avoid potential re-trafficking of victims after their return.

The Training Manual for Combating Trafficking in Women and Children, developed as part of the United Nations inter-agency project on trafficking in women and children in the sub-Mekong region, enumerates some of the difficulties faced by victims of trafficking at the time of their return. These challenges were determined in the context of the Greater Mekong subregion, but similar challenges will be faced by trafficked persons returning to other regions of the world.

- Trafficked persons often no longer have (or never had) personal documents such as a passport or national identity card and usually need help to travel back safely.
- The trafficked person may feel ashamed to return home without having earned a lot of money to support the family or to pay off debts, since that was the reason for going away in the first place. They may feel unsuccessful, as if they have failed their families in this way. The family may also have such feelings towards the returnee.
- In some societies, social acceptance of the person returning to the community may be dependent on whether they were able to send money back while they were away. Even though communities often look down on women who were sex workers, they are likely to be accepted back—at least to a certain extent—if they have sent money before or bring money back for their families. However, most trafficked victims do not manage to send money back to their family while at the point of destination, because the wages are not sufficient.
- Opportunities for work in the home community may be very limited, wages are generally lower and some may regard the work as more demanding than the work they did in the place they were trafficked to or were in.
- They may have become used to a different lifestyle elsewhere or abroad, living in cities, wearing different clothes or having more freedom than they had at home. It may be difficult to readjust to the slower pace of life and the isolation in rural areas.

- Women and girls who have worked in the sex industry usually do not share their real experiences with their families and communities, because they feel ashamed. They may also feel alienated from their families owing to the often humiliating experiences they have gone through. At the same time, the community may look down on them, considering them to be spoiled and unfit for marriage and as having a corrupting influence on other young people. Some of them may look for a way out by returning to the sex trade as sex workers or by becoming recruiters themselves.
- The relationship between the woman/child and her (or his) family may have changed owing to the trafficking experience. Returning daughters or sons may feel resentful, thinking that they exist only to support their parents and/or families. Parents and family members may also feel they have less control over their daughters or sons or wives. In the case of married women, their husband may have taken a girlfriend or another wife while they were away, or the woman may have a boyfriend. Either partner may want to break up the marriage because they no longer trust each other—especially if the woman worked as a sex worker or is suspected to have done so.
- Some returnees come back with an illness. Sometimes the illness may be caused by the conditions in which they were working, by alcohol or drug abuse, or by physical or sexual abuse. The illness may be complicated because they usually have no access to good medical treatment while they are in the host State or place.
- Those who return may have emotional or psychological problems, spinal injuries, respiratory problems, tuberculosis, malnutrition, dental problems, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, injuries from assault and complications from surgery or abortion. Illness places an additional financial burden on the family. If the illness is HIV/AIDS, it can also cause social shame for the affected person and her or his family. Some women/children who are ill may be afraid of being abandoned by their families.
- Returnees may be afraid of the police and other officials, in particular if they have experienced corruption or abuse at their hands during the trafficking. They may also be afraid that they will not be treated well because they left the State or area illegally.
- Fear of some kind of retaliation or persecution by the traffickers is not uncommon, especially for those who were trafficked by people involved in other criminal activities, like the arms or drug trade, and have seen these activities.
- So, trafficked persons who return home may have various problems. If these problems are not solved and the returnees are not supported, it is likely that they will be abused and exploited again, sometimes even trafficked once more. Because every trafficked person's situation is different, organizations providing support for return and reintegration in the home State need to find out exactly what kind of support the returnee may need. The necessary information can be obtained through careful planning, prior to return, by consulting:

In the destination State, the person who wishes to return and any institution or organization that is helping or taking care of her or him

In the State of origin, the family or nearest relatives to whom the returnee will go back



Source: Training Manual for Combating Trafficking in Women and Children, developed as part of the United Nations inter-agency project on trafficking in women and children in the sub-Mekong region, available at: www.un.or.th/traffickingProject/trafficking_manual.pdf