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GMS-07

## RE-THINKING REINTEGRATION

### WHAT DO RETURNING VICTIMS REALLY WANT & NEED? EVIDENCE FROM THAILAND AND THE PHILIPPINES

<b>KEYWORD</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <b>Topic:</b> Victim protection; reintegration</li><li>▪ <b>Information type:</b> Lessons learned from reintegration programs in Asia, in particular, in-depth interviews with Thai and Filipina returned victims of trafficking from destinations in and out of Asia; n=59</li></ul>
<b>Synopsis</b>	<i>Filipina and Thai self-returned and assisted victims of trafficking provide insight on their real needs, challenges, and desires, and how the reintegration assistance they received helped or hindered their recovery.</i>
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*In recent years there has been a growth of protection programs and institutions to assist victims of human trafficking, around the world. However, that growth has not always been followed by improved quality care and services, especially in the area of long-term community-based integration and real livelihood alternatives.*

*In some cases, reintegration programs have led to limited or no real positive impact for returned victims; in the worst cases, poorly designed assistance has actually harmed rather than helped returnees. Cases have been documented in which returned victims were confined in tightly controlled premises, restricting their autonomy and freedom rather than improving it. There have been cases in which physical and psychological punishments have been used to discipline returnees, and many examples where the education and skills training provided were inadequate—wasting the returnee’s time, instead of leading to decent jobs and a sustainable livelihood.<sup>1</sup> After years of implementing programs to support victims on return, it is time to assess what works, what does not, and ways forward in providing effective support.*

*This report summarises lessons learned from reintegration programs in Asia, in particular the key findings of recent research based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 59 returned victims of sex and labor trafficking in Thailand and the Philippines.<sup>2</sup>*

*Insight from returned victims of trafficking – on their individual experiences, their reflections on the reintegration assistance they received, their main worries and needs upon return, and suggestions for improving the quality and effectiveness of reintegration assistance<sup>3</sup> – revealed 5 key lessons learned. All hinge on the philosophy of empowering victims to have informed, economically viable choices when they are ready for them, including victims who were not properly identified as such. Empowerment and making informed choices is, in itself, seen as the necessary first step to victims taking back control of their lives.*

<sup>2</sup> ILO (2009). *Going home – Moving on. A study of the trends and experiences of returned victims of trafficking in Thailand and the Philippines.* (Forthcoming report).

<sup>3</sup> As the research mainly focuses on assisting returned youth and adults, child-specific perspectives of recovery and integration are not included.

<sup>1</sup> ILO (2006). *Child-friendly standards & guidelines for the recovery and integration of trafficking children.*

**Defining (re)integration.** Human trafficking can result from a migration process where migrants lose autonomy and control of their own situation and are ultimately exploited. (Re)Integration should therefore be about ensuring victims of trafficking regain their autonomy and control of their own lives. It is not just about returning back home, but about being socially and economically empowered to make better informed decisions, and to become a healthy, productive member of society wherever that might be. In many cases (re)integration means a victim will return to his/her family and area of origin, but it may also involve integration into a new community or even a new country, depending on the needs and opportunities available for the victim. A central aspect of (re)integration is to promote self-reliance and resiliency, and to empower, encourage, and equip returned victims of trafficking to improve their own situation based on their skills and aspirations.

**KEY POINTS: DOES YOUR (RE)-INTEGRATION PROGRAM INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING 5 ELEMENTS THAT VICTIMS OFTEN WANT AND NEED?**

- ☑ **1 Flexible and individualized support**, with adult victims of trafficking having the right to make their own informed choices – this is a rights-based approach.
- ☑ **2 Economic empowerment**, with skills training having clear and direct links to the private sector – not just training for the sake of training.
- ☑ **3 Safe and legal re-migration** as an alternative livelihood strategy: re-integration does not necessarily mean going home; it is not a safe or realistic possibility for some returned victims.
- ☑ **4 More pro-active outreach** in hot-spot source areas and immigration checkpoints, to identify unofficial returned victims of trafficking who were not ever identified as victims of trafficking or offered services.
- ☑ **5 Service providers ready to help, when returnees are ready** to receive assistance. Returned victims might not require services immediately.

☑ **1 Flexible and individualized support, with victims having the right to make their own informed choices**

Victims of trafficking return from a myriad of different situations, and – based on the kind of exploitation they faced, their age, sex, cultural identity, personality, and many other factors – each individual may simply have a different response to the support offered to him or her. As one returned Thai woman put it, *“Everyone’s experience is different, but everyone has had a difficult life”*.<sup>2</sup> Some return empowered, some broken, some with savings, some without; some are mentally strong and resilient, while some remain weak and vulnerable. A lesson learned from working with returned victims is that pre-designed and generalized “one size fits all” assistance programs often result in returnees declining assistance or dropping out as they feel it is not well-suited for their specific situation.

**Individualized support** should take, as point of departure, each returnees’ specific needs and concerns, his/her specific strengths, and his/her resources and aspirations. This information can be identified in the screening and intake phase to inform the type of assistance offered (and not just be collected for data collection’s sake). Service providers best answer to individualized support needs when flexible and prepared to address different needs and situations through a broad, secure referral system, establishing close linkages with other service providers, local government institutions, and the private sector.

**Successful, rights-based victim protection programs respect an adult victim's right to make his/her own choices.** Many migrant workers migrate for economic reasons, and many of those who become victims of trafficking end up returning home empty-handed, with insufficient savings or even heavily in debt. Some returnees are under constant pressure from family members to earn more money than is realistically possible through regular jobs or alternative livelihood support. Thus, although support should be offered, including family counseling and financial planning, it should be expected – and respected – that some victims will choose to work in the informal sector, either locally area or abroad. Instead of rejecting returnees who decide to work in an informal sector out of socio-economic pressure to earn more, it is important to keep respecting victims' rights to make their own choices. Returnees' plans and desires for the future, no matter what work sector they chose or whether they stay home or re-migrate, should be respected. Social workers and peer support groups should try to keep contact with such re-migrating survivors and continue to offer other forms of assistance, even if the survivor at first declines such assistance.

#### **Assistance priority list and recommendations by returnees**

Overall, regardless of the geographic area in which they settled, the trafficking survivors interviewed conveyed that the most crucial support they have needed in their post-return life included...

- Assistance in building new skills and finding work
- Emotional support from peers and/or professional counsellors
- Legal advice about their rights and options, and support at every step if they choose to engage in legal processes to bring their abusers to justice
- Financial support that can allow for more ambitious livelihood building
- Compensation for abuses suffered as victims of a crime
- Physical health care
- Protection from traffickers' retribution.

The women urged agencies to be active in their outreach towards trafficking survivors, to maintain clear and continuous communication over the long term, and to recognize that not all women want or need all services in a package – some services may be needed immediately, some later, and some never.

## **2 Economic empowerment...not training for the sake of training**

**The push factors driving the person's migration to begin with often remain the key challenge upon return.** The Thai and Filipina returnees interviewed indicated that it is important to recognize the factors that encourage and trigger migration, such as family responsibility, economic needs and the pressure of debt, a lack of adequate job options, and a desire for the social status and respect that is gained through affluence. These factors remain the most pressing factors after a woman's return. Women who had experienced trafficking and labor abuse abroad reported that, despite traumas suffered, their greatest concerns when they came back still included supporting their family members, having a job with a secure income, and having enough money to avoid worrying about debt. Indeed, several studies have revealed that returned victims of trafficking emphasize future livelihood possibilities and economic independence more than delving into exploitation traumas or a desire to

return to things as they were before migration.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the Thai and Filipina returnees said they were worried first and foremost about debts and lack of savings, and secondly about community reaction/stigma. Interestingly, their concerns about being stigmatized in their home community were mainly a fear of returning as a “failed migrant” economically. As two Filipina returnees described it,

***“I could not take the fact that I was going home without money. I was a failure. I was not able to send anything to my family and son...”***

***“I couldn’t accept the fact that I was unsuccessful in Dubai. I didn’t even have money at all. I was going home to the Philippines defeated...”***

Returned Thai women explained having similar concerns, particularly how the stigma associated with sex work abroad was overshadowed by the stigma of coming home without money:

***“If I’d brought money back with me, people in the village would change how they were with me...they would not criticize me. I’d be like a sweet smell to them, I could stink and they would still say I smelled sweet if I had money...”***

#### **5 reasons to emphasize economic empowerment for trafficking survivors.**

While economic empowerment is often the most urgent concern of many returning victims, it often does not rank equally high in many existing victim protection and reintegration programs. Here are 5 reasons why it should:

- ✓ *It is what survivors often say they want and need.*
- ✓ *Economic empowerment activities can motivate participation in other services that survivors may not immediately recognize as useful or necessary.*
- ✓ *Involvement in economic activities requires participation in a wider community, thereby contributing to social reintegration.*
- ✓ *Economic empowerment can reduce any stigmas that might be related to an unsuccessful migration attempt, and thereby also be socially empowering.*
- ✓ *Involvement in economic activities can be a strong incentive to settle in one location, improving social reintegration and reducing the risk of further exploitation. When carried out with family members, there can be additional family reintegration benefits.*

**Quality skills training and links to the private sector.** Although many returnees want to work to improve their livelihood, they often possess inadequate labor market skills and upon return they face the same lack of decent work opportunities that first propelled them to seek employment abroad. Therefore, quality skill and business training is a crucial component to successful integration that should lead to employment and economic independence. However, skills training courses offered by service providers are, in spite of good intentions, often limited both in terms variety, quality, and appropriateness given local job markets. Too often skills training does not lead to new job opportunities or longer term livelihood improvements for returnees and their dependents.

To improve the quality of skills training and make it more dynamic and interesting to returnees, it is necessary to move beyond small-scale traditional NGO ‘in-house’ training programs and establish better links to the private sector and ‘real-life’ on-the-

<sup>4</sup> May-Len Skilbrei and Marianne Tveit (2007). *Facing Return: Perceptions of Repatriation among Nigerian Women in Prostitution in Norway*. Fafo; Anette Brunovskis and Rebecca Surtees (2007). *Leaving the past behind? When victims of trafficking decline assistance*. Fafo; Guri Tyldum, Marianne Tveit, Anette Brunovskis (2005). *Taking Stock. A review of the existing research on trafficking for sexual exploitation*. Fafo; Pearson, Elaine (2002). *Human Trafficking, Human Rights - Redefining Victim Protection*. Anti Slavery International.

job trainings. There is also a need to ensure that skills trainings are efficiently followed up by job placement, so that time in training is more likely to pay off. Cooperation with the private sector, including employer's organizations, business associations, and local chambers of commerce can improve direct job placement for qualified returnees. Apprenticeship agreements, wage subsidies, stipends, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs all can be used to build incentives among employers to provide jobs to qualified, properly trained survivors.



#### **4 common limitations in skills training and livelihood components of reintegration programs:**

1. **Only offering a few traditional gender-stereotyped skills training activities**, for example sewing or cooking classes, which are not market-oriented or able to secure urgently needed earnings. Vocational training programs in "traditional areas" can put returnees into saturated job markets, usually without the business and financial skills to compete against well-established businesses. Furthermore, after spending time abroad and being exposed to different lifestyles and cultures, many returnees find such traditional programs uninspiring.
2. **Treating skills training as a goal instead of a step that leads to decent jobs** and new livelihood opportunities. These are often not followed up by the necessary job-placement schemes and services.
3. **Treating skills training as occupational therapy to address psychosocial trauma, rather than a professional market-oriented activity** whose objective is to help returnees get a decent job and their own income. Some may be too long (sometime several months) without providing proper stipends or respecting returnees' needs to earn money for themselves and their families while they are in a skills training course.
4. **Not carefully considering the different individual aptitudes and ambitions** among returnees.



### **3 Safe and legal re-migration as an alternative livelihood strategy**

**Re-integration is not necessarily about "going home."** Many returned victims of trafficking migrate again in order to work and make better earnings abroad than that which is possible at 'home'. Few of the Filipinas interviewed in this study considered themselves returning for good<sup>5</sup>; in other studies of Burmese and Filipina trafficking victims, more than 70%<sup>6</sup> of returned trafficking victims decided to re-migrate, even after taking advantage of conventional home-oriented reintegration programs. Many of those who wish to re-migrate feel that during the next journey they will be better prepared for the dangers, and somehow better able to protect themselves and find a job. While it is important to offer economic empowerment and financial assistance at the returnee's place of origin, it is equally important to offer assistance to returnees who are, realistically, likely to migrate again. This can be done by introducing and promoting **safe, legal migration alternatives into reintegration programs**, to ensure that repeat migrants are better prepared and know how to get assistance if needed.

<sup>5</sup> Asis, M. MB (2001). *Filipina women at the journey's end: exploring gender issues in return migration*. Paper presented at the International Workshop on International Labour Migration and Socio-Economic Change in Southeast and East Asia, Scalabrini Migration Centre, 2001. This study was focused on female return migrants in general and not limited to victims of trafficking.

<sup>6</sup> In the Asis (2001) study, 76% of the interviewed return migrants expressed their desire to migrate again and during an internal evaluation of a reintegration programme (tracer study) the author found that approximately 75% of Burmese (Shan) victims of trafficking who had received return and reintegration assistance had re-migrated back into Thailand within a year of being returned.

The ideal that victims of trafficking can return home to their family and community and live a contented life is not always realistic. Many victims of trafficking and labor exploitation are ambivalent or directly reluctant about returning home. For some, returning home is considered a last option, taken only when conditions are completely untenable or when deportation is inevitable. Returning home is certainly the best solution and choice for some migrants; however, many cannot go home because:

- They are not accepted;
- It is dangerous for them (conflict, re-trafficking);
- They need medical or psychological care not available locally; or
- They simply have no family or community to return to.

This means many returnees have to integrate into communities other than their place of origin, thus requiring alternatives to traditional reintegration. Rural returnees who have lived and worked in cities for some years may, for example, be better suited to **urban integration**. They might feel less stigmatized than at home, and they might rightly feel there are more occupational and livelihood options available in urban areas.

Another integration alternative might be to consider **destination-based integration** where feasible. Trafficking survivors who are physically and mentally fit and can remain legally in the destination country/area could be offered initial assistance and support to obtain necessary work permits and find new decent jobs in non-exploitative workplaces. This is sometimes the preferred solution for many victims of trafficking, as remaining at the destination with a new job would help them toward economic empowerment more rapidly, as described by a Filipino woman below. After escaping an exploitative situation in Brunei, she still did not want to return to the Philippines, but instead wanted to try again to improve her financial situation before returning home:

***“If we only had the chance to work there (Brunei) for six months we could have saved some money. But it was all for naught. Not only did we have to return, we had debts to pay...”***

Although destination-based integration might sound politically challenging, it could in many cases be cost-effective. For example, if migrant workers in Factory B were exploited and identified as victims of trafficking, after being screened and provided with necessary protection and services some may be offered a new, decent job in Factory A, where migrant labor may already be in demand. This form of destination-based integration should be considered as an alternative to spending time and resources sending victims to shelters, supporting them there for months or years before paying to send them back to their home countries, from where many may re-migrate.

**4 Pro-active outreach in hotspot source / return areas can identify mis-identified and unofficial victims of trafficking**

The majority of victims of trafficking are not identified in the destination areas or enrolled in official return and reintegration programs. Instead, they return silently, as ‘self-returnees’. However, this does not mean that they are not in need of assistance. Often, they are simply unaware of assistance available, and they struggle alone to cope with difficulties upon return. In the ILO Thai-Filipina research, some of the Thai self-returnees criticized service providers for not reaching out to self-returnees and making their assistance more widely known. Some women struggled for years after

their return before having any idea that they might be eligible for assistance. One Thai self-returnee reflected on her own harsh experiences:

***“All the government agencies and development groups have to look for and help women who just got home. Because, if the women don’t have choices in life, they might be lured by agents to go again...if I had someone to help me when I first came back from Japan, if I had work to do (at home), I wouldn’t have gone to Taiwan again, twice, and then come home and tried to kill myself...”***

Efforts should be made to create awareness about support options for returnees in hotspot local communities, and to reach out to returnees who may still face reintegration challenges. An example of the need to assist self-returned victims of trafficking became clear during focus group discussions (FGDs) with returned victims from different villages in Northern Thailand. All FGD participants mentioned that they each knew several other self-returned victims who had never been offered assistance. In a rough mapping of the local area, the FGD participants estimated that hundreds of women had self-returned from trafficking-like situations. This indicates that the number of victims of trafficking who are officially identified and offered assistance is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg – a hypothesis also supported by the fact that the number of victims who receive return and reintegration assistance only is a tiny fraction of the overall estimated number of victims at global level.<sup>7</sup>

In order to reach self-returnees, it is necessary to reconsider conventional victim identification strategies and apply more proactive methods for outreach, such as through the establishment of community watch/support networks in hotspot origin communities, or through outreach and service provision along routes and transit points used by self-returned victims (such as deportation channels and immigration checkpoints). Another related strategy is to tap into migrant social networks. It is well-known that migrants rely heavily on social networks in the out-migration phase, and this can be utilized in the return phase as well. In practice, existing members of peer support groups can help spread the word about assistance available in their local areas and invite other returned victims of trafficking to reintegration meetings and activities, who otherwise would not be reached.

**5 Service providers should be ready to provide or refer services when returnees are ready to receive assistance**

Many victims of trafficking who have just returned from abroad (both official and unofficial returnees) decline assistance and prefer at first to deal with their situation on their own. They feel overwhelmed and skeptical towards assistance offered, and feel convinced that they are able to handle the challenges. Many of the officially returned Thai women interviewed said that they had received a lot of information from anti-trafficking officials upon return, but sometimes it was too much to absorb at the moment of arrival. One woman stated that after hours of traveling, she just wanted to go home as soon as possible, so did not pay much attention to what the officials told her at the airport. Another Thai returnee said she could not remember

<sup>7</sup> The International Organization on Migration (IOM), one of the leading organizations focusing on the return and reintegration process, has assisted approximately 15,000 persons since 1994 ([www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)). While this is a commendable achievement, it is only around 0.15% of the number of victims estimated by the US State Department (calculation based on estimate of 700,000 persons trafficked annually for 14 years) and around 0.6% of the estimated figure used by the ILO. Calculations like this, which are based on estimates, naturally only give an indication, and there are many differences in figures between regions and countries. However, regional research shows the same trend. A study of trafficking in south-eastern Europe concluded that reintegration assistance was only provided to an estimated 7 per cent of trafficked women and girls (UNICEF, UNOHCHR, OSCE-ODIHR, 2002).

the name of the officials who met her at the airport, or what agency they worked for, or the content of what they told her.

Later, however, after some months back home, many returnees realize the difficulties of being back. Their savings (if they had any) may be spent, the social position in their family and community may have changed, they realize they cannot earn what is needed for themselves and their families, and they might feel stigmatized or confined in their local community. At this point, many are likely to start looking for alternatives, including re-migration through irregular channels or into job sectors (often informal) where they previously had been exploited. They are, in other words, becoming vulnerable to re-trafficking. However, as they experience difficulties and begin to consider alternatives, they could also be in a phase where they are open to accept assistance, perhaps even proactively seeking assistance. Even those who initially declined might at this later point be ready and more willing to participate in reintegration programs. In order to identify returning women who might be in need of assistance, it makes good sense to try to contact them at the moment of arrival. However, given emotional and physical exhaustion, and the flood of preoccupations and worries that many victims experience during their return, they may not be prepared to consider all the kinds of assistance offered during initial contact. The challenge is to make contact in a way that is not overwhelming for the returnee, but does let him/her know how to get assistance when he/she is ready to receive it.



**Real training for real jobs.**

Thai victims of trafficking, self-returned from exploitation in places outside of Southeast Asia such as Japan and the Middle East, receive practical on-the-job training (above) and job opportunities (below) in a popular restaurant in northern Thailand. Training and job placement assistance was provided by local NGO SEPOM, with support from ILO.



Photo credit: Anders Lisborg.

**About the author:** Anders Lisborg has been working on anti-trafficking and migration issues in Europe and Asia for over a decade, and is the former Programme Officer of the ILO return & reintegration project, based in Bangkok.