

# External contribution

## Strengthening support to Victims of Human Trafficking through Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration

IOM Belgium and Luxembourg

### Introduction

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), established in 1951, is the leading intergovernmental organization in the field of migration and is part of the United Nations System since 2016. IOM is dedicated to promoting humane and orderly migration for the benefit of all. It does so by providing support to migrants across the world, developing effective responses to the shifting dynamics of migration and providing advice on migration policy and practice. The Organization collaborates with governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental partners to improve the resilience of people on the move, particularly those in situations of vulnerability.

As one of the main partners of the Belgian Government on its Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme, IOM is often asked to support victims of human trafficking (VoTs) when they wish to return voluntarily to their countries of origin.

Safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration are an indispensable part of a comprehensive approach to migration management. The AVRR programme aims to support migrants who are unable or unwilling to remain in Belgium and wish to return to their country of origin. It is done at the free and informed choice of migrants and based on a risk assessment, when vulnerabilities are identified.

IOM provides dedicated support to victims of human trafficking wishing to return voluntarily to their country of origin.

This contribution highlights the work of IOM in identifying, protecting and upholding the rights of victims of human trafficking during the AVRR process, placing a particular emphasis on voluntary return and tailored reintegration assistance as a means of fostering the resilience of victims of human trafficking.

### Why some Survivors<sup>499</sup> of Human Trafficking opt for voluntary return rather than for a protection procedure in Belgium

Based on anecdotal evidence, it is known that many survivors of trafficking choose to return to their country of origin after escaping their ordeal rather than staying on the Belgian territory. The reasons for this decision are unique to each individual and depend on personal circumstances. Nevertheless, there are common factors that influence this choice. Some survivors wish to remain in Belgium but are not able to do so for several reasons. For example, many survivors are unable to enroll in the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) because they do not meet the specific criteria<sup>500</sup> required to initiate judicial proceedings. Without meeting these criteria, they cannot obtain formal recognition or legal status, leaving them without access to the essential protection and support services they need.

499 This publication uses both the term 'victims' and 'survivors'. Through the use of the term 'survivors', rather than the more passive sounding term 'victims', IOM wishes to acknowledge the person's agency and resiliency more.

500 To be supported by one of the specialized centers, to cooperate with the judiciary procedure, to end ties with the perpetrators.

This process is further complicated by numerous judicial and institutional challenges. For instance, the lack of uniform protection laws across the European Union prevents a victim trafficked in a neighbouring country from accessing the NRM in Belgium, thereby limiting their ability to receive support and assistance on Belgian territory. It is also challenging to gather sufficient corroborative evidence to support cases. Finally, legal processes are lengthy and demanding for the victims.

Other survivors, who meet the necessary requirements to enter the procedure for victims of human trafficking and who are subsequently supported by one of the three specialized centres (Payoke, PAG-ASA, and Sūrya), might for various reasons not receive an extension of their legal status in Belgium in the end, while others are unable to find work.

Furthermore, **some survivors do not wish to remain in Belgium** and would rather return to their country of origin or a third country from which they have a residence permit. Indeed, for some survivors, fear of retaliation from their traffickers deters them from pursuing legal action and motivates their decision to return to their home country, seeking safety away from their perpetrators. Other survivors wish to be reunited with their family in the country of origin and want to leave Belgium as soon as possible.

Because of these diverse and often complex reasons, many survivors seek assistance from IOM, that makes the process of voluntary return more accessible and manageable for those wishing to leave Belgium.

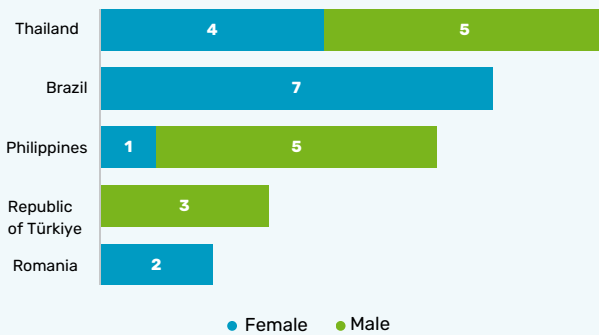
### IOM's global engagement against trafficking

IOM has been fighting human trafficking since 1994 and has become the world's largest direct assistance provider to trafficking victims. Since 1990, IOM has helped over 100,000 victims from at least 138 countries. IOM's unique reach to migrants and trafficking victims worldwide has given it marked expertise in identifying, protecting, assisting, referring and managing cases of trafficked persons. Globally, IOM implements a variety of counter-trafficking measures that fit within the existing legal framework to protect the rights of VoTs.

## The AVRR programme for Victims of Human Trafficking by IOM Belgium and Luxembourg

Under its AVRR programme, IOM Belgium and Luxembourg supports migrants who voluntarily wish to return to their country of origin or migrate to a third country where permanent residence is guaranteed. The AVRR programme is freely available to all migrants located in Belgium, regardless of their legal status, and without cost to the migrant. In 2022 and 2023, a total of 34 survivors of trafficking were supported by the programme and returned to their countries of origin. The graphic down below, shows the top five nationalities of the 34 beneficiaries who returned to their country of origin, broken down by gender. Other nationalities are Algeria, Belgium, Lithuania, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova and Serbia. The majority of them were victims of labour exploitation and sexual exploitation. It should be noted that most victims of labour exploitation were males, while most victims of sexual exploitation were females. Not included in the graphics are 19 survivors who received counselling but chose not to return.

Chart 1: Top 5 nationality by gender

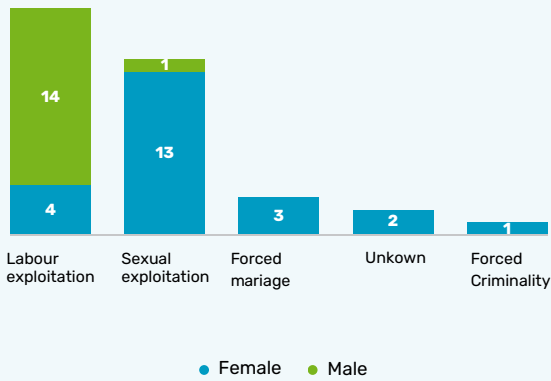


By adapting its holistic approach to the special protection needs of victims of trafficking, IOM ensures tailor-made support, focusing on the resilience and training of skills of the survivors along three stages: before departure, during the travel and upon return.

## IOM's AVRR Assistance

### Pre-departure assistance

Chart 2: Type of exploitation by gender



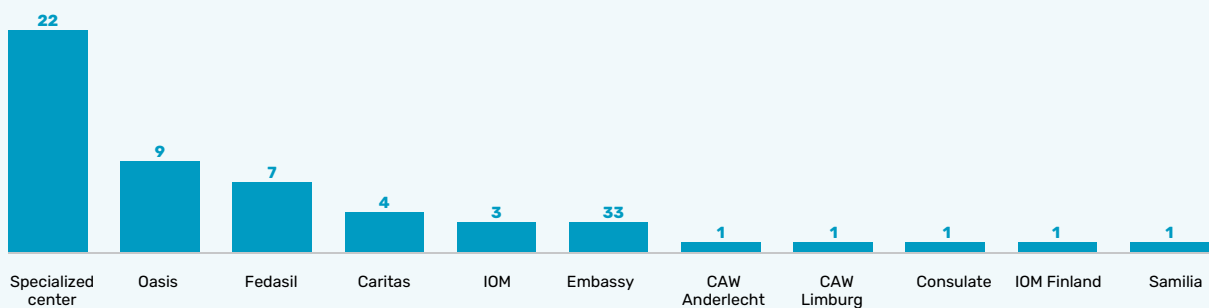
A crucial first step in assisting VoTs is victim identification<sup>502</sup>. Only with proper identification tools and methods can survivors be protected, and their rights restored in a timely manner.

In some cases, survivors are brought into contact or contact themselves one of the three specialized centres mandated to support the VoTs. In these instances, the contacted centre evaluates whether the individual is a (potential) VoT.

IOM Belgium and Luxembourg has been committed to providing support to victims of trafficking in the context of AVRR since the start of its reintegration programme in 2006.

In other cases, survivors may be referred to IOM, for example when the person does not meet the necessary requirements for prosecution to obtain recognition and legal status or when the person does not wish to remain in Belgium.

Chart 3: Cases referred by partners



502 IOM guidelines can be found in the Trafficking in Persons: Victim Identification and Assistance training guide. More information: [trafficking-in-persons-training-guide.pdf \(iom.int\)](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/2021/06/trafficking-in-persons-training-guide.pdf).

As the chart illustrates, referrals to IOM are made by a variety of actors, such as the specialised centres, Fedasil, NGO's, civil society organizations, the police and embassies. In these instances, IOM evaluates whether the person can be considered a VoT.

Referrals by partners other than one of the three specialised centres mainly happen when the survivors refuse to present themselves to law enforcement agencies (see footnote<sup>503</sup>, this is one of the three requirements that need to be met to be able to enter the procedure for victims of human trafficking in Belgium). Lack of reporting can be due to language barriers, lack of trust in law enforcement agencies, irregular stay, combined with fear of retaliation and negative coping strategies. Sometimes, VoTs do not see themselves as victims or may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and memory loss.

At first contact, IOM looks for several indicators to identify potential victims. Each type of exploitation has its own set of indicators (see training guide[1], p. 18). Once the indicators point to a potential trafficking case, a thorough screening process, including a risk assessment, takes place with the consent of the individual. The greatest concern when organizing the return of a VoT is their safety upon return, given that the traffickers could be in the country of origin and could pose a threat to the victim and/or their family.

Therefore, while guaranteeing the survivor's protection upon return, IOM has a responsibility to execute, in close collaboration with the IOM office in the country of origin and its partners, a risk assessment to ensure that survivors are not left to fend for themselves and do not fall back into a trafficking situation.

This assessment focuses on the family situation, the risks of stigmatization and the link to perpetrators.

More specifically, IOM evaluates the following domains:

- **Family:** Is the family in the country of origin at risk? Were family members complicit in the trafficking? Are there people of trust within the family? What is the financial situation of the survivor and their family? In some cases, a family situation assessment will be conducted by the IOM office in the country of origin.

- **The possibility of stigmatization, discrimination or reprisals upon return.**

- **The possible links to the perpetrators:** Is the criminal network still operating? Are there any risks for the survivors of falling prey to the traffickers again? Are there any risks of retaliation against the survivors or their family? Is there an ongoing investigation?

During the screening process, IOM's case management principles are consistently applied and internal due diligence procedures are followed. Once all information is gathered, it is shared with IOM in the country of origin so that they can proceed with the corroboration of the risk assessment, inform the mandated counterpart, in charge of the protection of VoTs in the country of origin, and, in some cases and with the consent of the survivor, inform law enforcement actors, when protection risks have been identified. IOM in the country of origin will also gather information on whether there are specialised local programmes available to further support the survivors. While for some survivors, it will be safe to return to their families, others may want assistance in finding a new place to live; this is also coordinated with the IOM office in that country.

During the pre-departure phase, all individuals receive tailor-made counselling sessions during which they receive information on the return process and on the reintegration programme. A second online counselling process is often organized with the IOM office of the country of origin, so the survivor can directly exchange information with them while also establishing a first contact that will continue after the survivor's return. This transnational collaboration ensures effective and direct referrals to local services and governmental institutions that will continue providing support to the beneficiaries upon arrival.

This counselling is a further opportunity to assess any vulnerabilities or risks linked to the travel and reintegration process. If they decide to return, the survivors are administratively and logistically supported, including with the obtention of their travel document, the coordination of an emergency shelter when needed, the booking of their flight ticket, and pocket money for the travel to their final destination.

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*

## Travel assistance

Survivors of trafficking might have **specific protection needs based on their individual experience to ensure safe travel** to their country of origin. Therefore, the survivors are always assisted by an IOM staff member upon departure, in transit and upon arrival. In some cases, IOM accompanies the survivors all the way until their final destination. This accompaniment will systematically take place when assisting unaccompanied minors survivors of trafficking but can also be facilitated for vulnerable survivors in need of additional protection and support during their travel. Upon arrival in the country of origin, IOM assists with border control and luggage collection. Initial information on the reintegration process is provided and provision of pocket money to cover basic needs is foreseen when needed. In some cases, overnight accommodation upon arrival will be necessary and facilitated by IOM. IOM can also support the survivors in filing a complaint directly at the airport upon arrival in the country of origin, in particular in instances when protection would be requested by the survivors.

## Reintegration assistance upon return

Reintegration assistance is designed to support the survivors of trafficking to sustainably reintegrate into their countries of origin and within the local communities. It is tailored to the needs of the survivors and comprises of different types of assistance. A comprehensive package of reintegration assistance includes the following services: housing or accommodation, medical assistance, psychological support and counselling, education and life skills, economic opportunities, legal and administrative support, family mediation, case management and assistance to family members if needed. Survivors of trafficking may require a single service (e.g. transportation, emergency medical care, job placement) or multiple services (e.g. a combination of housing, medical assistance, psychological care, legal support, education and vocational training).

Services may be trafficking-specific or they may be more general. Meaningful reintegration is a complex undertaking, often requiring a full and diverse set of services for victims (and sometimes for their families), who themselves have widely differing short- and long-term physical, psychological, social and economic needs. Once the immediate needs of trafficked persons have been met, many victims require further assistance to reintegrate into their families and communities (e.g. vocational training, economic support, long-term access to healthcare, counselling, education, family mediation, etc.).

Reintegration assistance is always provided through a migrant-centred approach, focusing on the well-being and protection of the beneficiary throughout the whole process. To reinforce this approach, counsellors follow principles of assistance (see figure below). By applying these principles, the agency of the individual is central as they are empowered to make an informed decision.

|  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Do no harm                                   | Rights based approach                |
| Non-discrimination                           | Self-determination and participation |
| Individualized assistance                    | Accountability                       |
| Continuum of assistance                      | Informed consent (adults)            |
| Gender sensitivity                           | Barrier-free access                  |
| Confidentiality, privacy and data protection | Child-centered assistance            |

IOM also carries out ongoing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of how the victims reintegrate into their communities, while safeguarding the data collection process to ensure privacy and security. This M&E helps to identify any challenges and opportunities for reintegration, with the goal of adjusting the support provided accordingly.

## Untangling vulnerability & resilience

Survivors of trafficking have multi-layered vulnerabilities<sup>504</sup> and resiliencies at various stages of their lives – before, during and after trafficking – which influence the support and services they may (or may not) need.

504 <https://publications.iom.int/books/iom-handbook-migrants-vulnerable-violence-exploitation-and-abuse>.

Vulnerability and resilience are also influenced and created by the family and community environments into which trafficked persons seek to reintegrate. Vulnerabilities and resiliencies can fluctuate over time and in response to a range of factors.

Addressing the needs related to trafficking is crucial as a first step in recovery and longer-term reintegration. However, assistance needs are not only related to the impact and consequences of trafficking. Each survivor of trafficking has a distinct experience of life before, during and after exploitation, with individual vulnerabilities as well as sources of resilience and support. By distinguishing whether victims' assistance needs stem from trafficking itself or from underlying social and economic vulnerabilities, we can more precisely tailor reintegration support.

## Challenges in supporting Survivors of Human Trafficking

While considerable efforts are made to assist survivors of human trafficking, numerous challenges remain. During the assistance period, inconsistent information given by the victims can complicate the protection efforts, as different accounts and perceptions may lead to difficulties in understanding their needs. Additionally, the subjective perception of risk and safety among the victims can affect their willingness to engage with support services. Their past traumatic experiences often result in mistrust and a heightened sense of vulnerability, making it difficult for them to open up and fully cooperate with aid workers.

The role of IOM remains limited, often constrained by the limited reintegration support available, making it difficult for IOM to work on all aspects of the reintegration of survivors. Besides limited reintegration support, some countries also lack specialized programmes for VoTs. This further challenges the survivors' capability to reintegrate since those programmes are complementary to the reintegration support and are crucial in terms of addressing survivors' unique needs. Furthermore, survivors of trafficking might face a lack of future prospects in their countries of origin, which hinders their long-term recovery and reintegration into society.

In certain cases, trafficked individuals may not even recognize themselves as victims, which complicates efforts to provide them with the necessary support. This lack of self-identification is often due to the psychological manipulation and coercion used by traffickers, which distorts the survivors' understanding of their situation and may reinforce a sense of helplessness.

Hence, while there are dedicated efforts to support VoTs, the multifaceted nature of their needs and the systemic barriers they face necessitate a holistic and integrated approach. Addressing these challenges requires greater emphasis on creating sustainable, long-term solutions that empower survivors of trafficking to rebuild their lives with dignity and security.

## Overview of IOM Best Practices in the European Economic Area

IOM supports relevant stakeholders in strengthening counter-trafficking strategies and the protection of VoTs not only in Belgium but throughout the world. With this objective, IOM, in partnership with other organizations around the globe, has developed the largest global database with primary data on victims of trafficking: the [IOM Global Human Trafficking Database](#), which is a standardized counter-trafficking data management tool. Additionally, IOM developed good practices in different countries of the European Economic Area (EEA), focusing on strengthening national referral mechanisms<sup>505</sup>, capacity building of border guards, and supporting non-governmental organizations.<sup>506</sup>

<sup>505</sup> IOM defines a referral mechanism for migrants vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse as a process of cooperation between multiple stakeholders to provide protection and assistance services to vulnerable migrants.

<sup>506</sup> More information on the work of IOM at the EEA level can be found on: <https://eea.iom.int/counter-trafficking-human-beings>.

## Poland



IOM Poland strengthens the **capacity of the Polish Border Guard officers and LOT cabin crew to better detect trafficking in human beings.**<sup>507</sup> More

than 3,600 officers and cabin crew were trained between December 2020 and April 2024. In addition, IOM supports the authorities in enhancing cooperation between the Border Guards and law enforcement agencies from Norway and Great Britain through the organization of study visits to these countries.

## IOM's counter trafficking activities in Belgium

In its counter-trafficking response in Belgium, IOM covers all aspects of counter-trafficking responses – Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnerships, also known as the 4P paradigm:

**Prevention:** IOM carries out a range of awareness-raising activities on the prevention and identification of (potential) VoTs under the AVRR programme, using podcasts, videos and social media, targeting front-line workers and the general public. Moreover, IOM contributes to the organization of the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons (WDATIP) and the Blue Heart Campaign to increase awareness on the situation of human trafficking victims and to support and protect their rights. This year, IOM Belgium will provide a series of info sessions on return and reintegration for VoTs to the specialized centres in charge of the reception, protection and assistance of survivors of trafficking. The training can be provided to other relevant partners of the AVRR programme.

**Protection:** IOM strives to safeguard and uphold the rights of VoTs. Through its AVRR programme, IOM provides safe and free return for migrants who have chosen to return to their country of origin.

**Prosecution:** IOM regularly organizes study visits with governmental officials from third countries to exchange on best practices in combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (THB). During these study visits, the delegations of national officials interact with various Belgian authorities and organizations to gain insights into legal frameworks, law enforcement practices, victim assistance programmes, NGOs' roles, and existing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. These visits aim to strengthen policies and practices against trafficking in these third countries. The National Referral Mechanism in Belgium and the Belgian National Rapporteur are often regarded as amongst the most efficient in the EEA.

**Partnerships:** In the framework of the AVRR programme, IOM works with various partners, both in Belgium and in the countries of origin, to offer the most suitable support for the beneficiaries. Following the victim-centred and rights-based approaches, IOM coordinates closely with the three mandated centres that assist VoTs in Belgium, as well as with police services and embassies. IOM has also elaborated a referral partnership with other civil society organizations and public authorities to assist the survivors that could not enroll in the National Referral Mechanism.

## Example of a successful return and reintegration story

This is the story of Gloria<sup>508</sup>, a Nigerian national, single mother of three, living in Lagos. Before leaving her country and arriving in Belgium, Gloria had never left Nigeria and used to work as a house cleaner. She was recruited in Lagos and was promised a good work opportunity as a house cleaner in Europe. At the time of her recruitment, Gloria was financially vulnerable. As her husband had just left her with their three children, and having difficulties earning enough money to support her family, she accepted the offer, hoping that this would enable her to send money back home.

<sup>507</sup> More information on this project can be found on: <https://poland.iom.int/pl/stories/clear-skies-ahead-iom-teams-lot-polish-airlines-fight-human-trafficking>.

<sup>508</sup> The name Gloria is an Alias.

The recruiter arranged Gloria's travel documents and had her take an oath in a shrine so that she would not disclose the arrangement. Such rituals, common within Nigerian trafficking networks, are meant to control the victims and keep them under bondage. Gloria travelled by land and sea with a transporter. It took them around two weeks to reach Belgium. When she arrived, she was immediately transferred to a prostitution house in Antwerp. She quickly understood what was going on and managed to escape after having been locked up in the house for numerous days. She had to leave everything behind: her passport, phone, clothes, etc.

Despite facing this traumatic experience, Gloria showed a great level of resilience and mental strength. She was extremely resourceful and managed to find the embassy of Nigeria and IOM's office on her own. She was directly counselled by IOM and informed about the different options and types of support available to her. Gloria did not want to go to the police and press charges, nor did she want to contact one of the three specialized centres. She was extremely scared that the network would find her again and wished to return to Lagos as soon as possible to be reunited with her three children who were staying with their grandparents. IOM managed to quickly organize her travel and in a matter of days, Gloria was reunited with her family and relocated to a community of her choice. She could benefit from IOM's AVRR Programme and decided to start an income-generating business with the allocated reintegration support. With the support, she rented premises where she opened a food and drinks shop. Through this microbusiness, Gloria now has access to a reasonable and sustainable standard of living and is able to participate in economic growth possibilities in her country of origin. Thanks to her income-generating activities, Gloria is economically self-sufficient and as such, less vulnerable to being re-trafficked. Gloria can now live a life that is safe, dignified and self-sustaining.

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