

Article

Reintegration Dynamics: The Vital Role of Non-State Actors in Supporting Returnees in Nigeria

Funke Bukola Adeyeye¹, Ayotunde Titilayo²

¹funkebukolaadeyeye@gmail.com, ²titilayo@oauife.edu.ng

Correspondence: funkebukolaadeyeye@gmail.com

Abstract

Return migration is a growing phenomenon in Nigeria, driven by voluntary and forced returns from countries across the globe. This study explores the role of non-state actors (NSAs) – including NGOs, faith-based groups, and civil society organizations – in the reintegration of returnees in Lagos State, Nigeria. Using a qualitative design, the research draws on a desk review of migration literature and key informant interviews with four non-state actors. Findings reveal that NSAs play crucial roles in providing psychosocial support, economic empowerment, legal aid, and referral-based healthcare and shelter services. Despite their efforts, they face numerous challenges, including limited funding, lack of data profiling, abandonment of reintegration by returnees, and unmet expectations. The study highlights the need for policy reforms, capacity building, improved funding, and enhanced collaboration among stakeholders to strengthen reintegration outcomes. It contributes to migration scholarship and offers practical recommendations for sustainable returnee reintegration frameworks in Nigeria.

Keywords: Non-State Actors, Returnees, Reintegration, Migration, Lagos, Psychosocial Support, Economic Empowerment

Introduction

Return migration is a pressing concern in global and national migration discourse. For countries like Nigeria – marked by high rates of both voluntary and forced migration – the phenomenon of returnees has escalated over the past decades due to increasingly stringent migration controls in Europe, socioeconomic failures in destination countries, and targeted deportation policies. While international attention has largely focused on border management and deterrence mechanisms, the reintegration of returnees into their home communities remains under-addressed, fragmented, and poorly understood, particularly from the perspective of non-state actors (NSAs).

Reintegration, in its fullest sense, is not simply about physical return. It entails the comprehensive restoration of returnees into the economic, social, psychological, and political fabric of their communities. This process involves access to employment, shelter, psychosocial support, legal identity, and having a sense of belonging. In Nigeria, the increasing number of returnees – some traumatized, stigmatized, or economically disenfranchised – has stretched the limited capacities of state agencies, bringing to the fore the pivotal role of NSAs in filling systemic gaps. These actors include civil society organizations, legal advocacy groups, religious institutions, women-led networks, and community-based initiatives working to provide transitional services to vulnerable returnees.

Lagos State, Nigeria's most urbanized and economically vibrant region, remains a central hub for returnees and a laboratory for diverse reintegration strategies. As a reception zone for voluntary and involuntary returnees – many repatriated through

International Organization for Migration (IOM) programmes or deported from Europe and the Middle East—Lagos presents a dense field of interventionist actors. However, existing reintegration programmes are often short-term, underfunded, and misaligned with local realities. Additionally, coordination between NSAs and state institutions is weak, leading to duplicated efforts, unmonitored programmes, and fragmented service delivery. While such scholarship on migration governance has emphasized state-led and international interventions, relatively few studies have examined how local NSAs design, implement, and adapt reintegration strategies in Nigeria. There is a growing consensus among scholars that bottom-up, community-rooted approaches are more sustainable and culturally congruent (Bakewell, 2008; Sinatti & Horst, 2015; de Regt et al., 2019). Nonetheless, empirical studies that explore the operational frameworks, institutional challenges, and lived impacts of NSAs in Nigerian contexts remain scarce.

This study investigates the roles, strategies, and challenges of four purposively selected NSAs in Lagos State: Initiative for Sustainable and Accountable Future for Empowerment (ISAFE), Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON), and Girls Inspired Development Network (GIDN). These organizations were chosen based on their demonstrated involvement in returnee reintegration, especially among vulnerable populations such as women, youth, and survivors of trafficking. Through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and document analysis, the study evaluates how these actors contribute to the reintegration ecosystem and identifies systemic and institutional constraints they face.

Literature Review

Migration, particularly forced and irregular migration, has become a defining feature of global mobility, with implications for governance, development, and human rights. Scholars have long explored the push and pull factors underlying migration flows, but return migration—and more specifically, reintegration—remains a relatively under-examined aspect, especially in African contexts. Reintegration refers to the multifaceted process through which returnees re-establish economic livelihoods, rebuild social ties, and recover psychological stability within their communities of origin. In practice, reintegration is neither linear nor guaranteed; it is a negotiated process affected by state policy, community attitudes, the returnee's migration experience, and the structure of support systems (Carling & Collins, 2020; Kuschminder, 2017).

The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) theory posits that migration is often a household strategy to diversify income sources and reduce vulnerability (Todaro, 1969). From this perspective, return migration becomes part of a cyclical system where knowledge, capital, and skills acquired abroad are reinvested at home. However, in cases of forced or failed migration—common among Nigerian returnees—the reintegration pathway is often marked by loss, trauma, and diminished aspirations. This challenges the NELM's assumptions and invites a rethinking of reintegration not as a return to economic stability, but as a reconstruction of fractured identities and livelihoods. Empirical work by Dustmann and Weiss (2007) in the United Kingdom and Clemens and Ogden (2014) in sub-

Saharan Africa supports the idea that return does not always imply successful reintegration, particularly when return is involuntary or unplanned.

Carling's (2008) Aspirations and Capabilities framework provides a more nuanced lens for understanding reintegration. According to this model, migration decisions—and by extension, reintegration outcomes—depend on the interaction between individuals' aspirations and their real or perceived capabilities. Returnees may aspire to rebuild their lives, but without institutional support, community acceptance, or psychological well-being, these aspirations may remain unmet. In this context, non-state actors (NSAs) function as intermediaries who help expand returnees' capabilities by providing services that the State fails to offer, such as psychosocial counselling, vocational training, and legal aid. The absence of these enabling institutions results in the reproduction of marginality and forced re-migration cycles (Kleist & Vammen, 2012).

The concept of human security, advanced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1994), further extends the analytical scope by highlighting the interconnected dimensions of vulnerability—economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. Reintegration programmes should therefore address not only job creation but also trauma healing, gender-based violence, housing insecurity, and access to justice. For Nigerian returnees—especially women and youth—the absence of such holistic interventions exacerbates re-migration pressures, social alienation, and psychological decline (HRW, 2019; de Regt et al., 2019). These gaps have been further amplified by the absence of targeted policies and weak social protection systems for returnees, particularly those returning from detention, trafficking, or war zones.

Comparative research in West Africa has shown that reintegration models tend to be most successful when they adopt a multidimensional approach—one that aligns economic reintegration with social inclusion and legal empowerment. For instance, IOM's community-based reintegration programmes in Guinea and Mali have demonstrated improved outcomes where returnees are supported alongside host communities, thereby reducing resentment and fostering mutual benefit. However, in these contexts, success is often constrained by donor-led timelines, political instability, and local resistance to returnee inclusion. In East Africa, studies from Ethiopia and Uganda illustrate the role of faith-based organizations and diaspora networks in delivering reintegration services. Sinatti and Horst (2015) noted that returnees who reconnect with transnational religious or professional groups are more likely to access economic support and mental health services. Yet, as in Nigeria, these efforts are often isolated from national policy frameworks, leading to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for scale.

Within Nigeria, empirical scholarship on reintegration has primarily focused on the role of state actors and international donors (Afolayan, 2009), with minimal focus on grassroots non-state interventions. While the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) and National Commission for Refugees, Migrants & Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI) remain central actors in the national response to return migration, their reach and resources are highly limited, especially in complex urban settings like Lagos. The State's overreliance on IOM-

facilitated Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) packages has also raised questions about sustainability, voluntariness, and the agency of returnees (Kuschminder, 2017). NSAs, by contrast, often operate on the frontlines of reintegration, providing context-sensitive, culturally grounded, and rights-based support. Organizations such as WOCON, ISAFE, and WARDC have locally appropriate strategies that combine livelihood support with legal empowerment and trauma care. However, these efforts are rarely captured in official migration statistics or policy evaluations. The literature suggests that the contributions of NSAs are essential to the sustainability of reintegration programmes, but without systemic integration and adequate funding, their impact remains circumscribed (Chikanda, Crush & Tawodzera, 2017).

A growing body of gender-sensitive migration literature also critiques the depoliticization of reintegration, particularly with the erasure of gender-based violence, stigma, and care work. De Regt et al. (2019) and Crenshaw (2021) emphasize the need to adopt intersectional approaches that recognize how gender, age, and class mediate the reintegration experience. In Nigeria, where patriarchal norms strongly shape perceptions of female mobility, returnee females are disproportionately stigmatized, with reintegration programmes often failing to acknowledge these realities. Legal clinics and gender-based organizations offer a critical alternative to male-dominated reintegration narratives.

The advent of digital economies has opened new pathways for economic reintegration, particularly among urban youth. NSAs in Lagos are experimenting with tech-based livelihood support—such as freelancing, e-commerce, and digital skill-building—to enable returnees to bypass saturated informal markets. This emerging trend reflects broader shifts in the global development field, where digital inclusion is now considered a key indicator of social reintegration and upward mobility. However, access to these opportunities is often stratified by gender, literacy, and geography, reinforcing pre-existing inequalities unless proactively addressed.

Beyond the economic or psychosocial lens, a growing body of scholarship emphasizes the importance of community-based reintegration models, especially in post-conflict and post-trafficking settings. These models stress the importance of embedding returnees within supportive networks that exist in their communities, such as traditional councils, religious leaders, women's groups, and vocational guilds (Frowd, 2018). In the West African context, communal identity plays a significant role in determining the degree to which returnees are accepted, monitored, or rejected. Western reintegration models often emphasize relational well-being and moral restoration.

In Nigeria, these communal reintegration systems are especially visible in rural and peri-urban areas, where returnees are sometimes subject to customary rituals of cleansing, shame, or atonement, particularly if they are returning from sex work, imprisonment, or failed migration attempts. Yet the literature warns that such practices can be supportive and exclusionary, offering emotional closure for some while reinforcing stigma for others. NSAs operating in these spaces should therefore

navigate a delicate balance between respecting local customs and advancing human rights, a challenge that has received scant scholarly attention.

Closely related is the concept of legal pluralism, which refers to the coexistence of multiple legal systems within a single sociopolitical space, such as statutory law, customary law, and religious law. Reintegration actors, especially legal-focused NSAs like WARDC and FIDA, should contend with legal pluralism when seeking redress for returnees who have suffered abuse, trafficking, or family abandonment.

This complexity is particularly salient for female returnees, who may face challenges over child custody, housing rights, or inheritance matters that are often decided in informal community courts or religious assemblies. Legal-focused NSAs attempt to navigate these terrains by combining legal aid with paralegal education, alternative dispute resolution, and community sensitization. Yet, the fragmentation of Nigeria's justice system – and the marginalization of rural or low-income litigants – continues to limit access to justice for returnees.

Urban contexts like Lagos present an entirely different set of reintegration dynamics. Lagos is not only the most populous city in Nigeria but also the economic nerve centre and an entry/re-entry point for many migrants. Urban reintegration challenges differ from rural ones in key ways: housing insecurity, social anonymity, gang violence, and strained infrastructure all complicate returnees' efforts to settle and rebuild. Scholars argue that Lagos' rapid urbanization and inequality exacerbate vulnerabilities among returnees, particularly those without family connections or digital literacy. Urban-based NSAs, including ISAFE and GIDN, have begun designing tailored programmes for city-based returnees. These include digital skills training, rent support, mental health hotlines, and targeted business incubators. However, urban returnees are often invisible in policy frameworks that still treat reintegration as a rural development issue. The International Labour Organization has noted that urban migrants are more likely to "fall through the cracks" of reintegration programmes, especially when their migration is undocumented or stigmatized.

Another critical challenge is the absence of centralized returnee data systems, which undermines coordination and follow-up. In the current Nigerian context, each organization – state or non-state – maintains its returnee database, with little or no interoperability. As a result, returnees often access services multiple times from different actors, while others fall entirely off the radar. The lack of real-time data sharing also hampers policy learning, prevents evidence-based interventions, and fosters duplication.

Despite these gaps, the literature identifies several emerging best practices in Nigeria's reintegration landscape. These include peer mentoring models where returnees are paired with others who have successfully reintegrated, safe house networks for at-risk female returnees, and returnee cooperatives that facilitate collective entrepreneurship. These practices are mostly developed by NSAs and remain under-documented in migration research, yet they provide crucial lessons for localized reintegration governance.

In Nigeria, trauma-informed reintegration is still in its infancy. Most NSAs lack trained psychologists or mental health professionals, relying instead on lay counsellors, religious leaders, or peer support networks. This is particularly risky for returnees recovering from sexual abuse, trafficking, or violent displacement. WARDC and WOCON attempted to bridge this gap by offering group therapy and linking survivors to legal protection services. However, funding constraints and cultural stigma around mental health continue to undermine these efforts. In many Nigerian communities, psychological trauma is medicalized, moralized, or simply ignored, making culturally sensitive mental health interventions both urgent and difficult.

Reintegration is not merely about access to employment or housing—it is about being accepted, feeling useful, and reclaiming agency. For many Nigerian returnees, especially youth who left as minors or under duress, return is experienced as a kind of social death—a rupture in dignity, dreams, and perceived worth. Clemens and Ogden (2014) described this as aspirational dislocation, where returnees are physically home but psychologically adrift.

In the Nigerian context, diaspora communities often serve as informal mentors, financiers, and connectors for returnees. Returnees who return with technical or entrepreneurial skills acquired abroad may leverage diaspora networks to launch businesses, navigate local bureaucracy, or even market products internationally. NSAs like ISAFE have begun exploring these potentials by piloting digital forums and diaspora-mentorship programmes. However, such initiatives remain limited in scope and largely undocumented in migration policy or academic literature. In some Nigerian communities, returnees with strong diaspora connections enjoy enhanced status and opportunities; others, perceived as failed migrants, are stigmatized or disbelieved. Bakewell (2008) warned that the romanticization of diaspora engagement can mask these tensions and result in policy blind spots. A more critical lens is necessary to understand the dynamics of transnational reintegration, not simply as a unidirectional return, but as an ongoing negotiation across borders, identities, and institutions.

Entrepreneurship is widely seen as a means of sustainable reintegration, offering economic independence, community value, and personal dignity (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007; Carling & Collins, 2020). Nigerian returnees often engage in small-scale trading, agro-processing, tailoring, and digital services. These ventures are typically informal, unregistered, and self-financed, making them both resilient and vulnerable. NSAs such as ISAFE and Caritas Nigeria support entrepreneurship through business kits, vocational training, and market linkages. However, such programmes are often standardized, short-term, and fail to provide sustained post-startup support. Moreover, many returnees lack basic financial literacy, credit access, or secure premises—factors that hinder long-term viability. This reality challenges the donor-driven assumption that business kits alone can guarantee reintegration. As Clemens and Ogden (2014) noted, entrepreneurship should be accompanied by ecosystem support—legal identity, property rights, internet access, and community acceptance.

In Lagos, returnees increasingly explore gig-economy jobs, including e-commerce, virtual assistance, crypto-trading, and content creation. These roles offer independence, skill growth, and limited startup barriers – but also expose returnees to precarity, income instability, and cyber risks. NSAs are beginning to respond with digital literacy programmes and mobile-based business incubation. Yet, concerns remain around equitable access, especially for rural, low-literacy, or female returnees. As such, digital reintegration should be accompanied by safeguards, mentorship, and inclusion frameworks.

In Nigeria, youth-led collectives have emerged to support returnees through music therapy, cooperative savings, urban farming, and art-based healing. GIDN, for instance, has pioneered menstrual health entrepreneurship and peer education among young female returnees, linking bodily autonomy to economic empowerment. These approaches align with de Regt al.'s (2019) call for participatory, age-sensitive reintegration that views youth not as passive recipients but as knowledge producers. Yet, youth-led models often struggle for legitimacy and resources, facing skepticism from formal institutions and exclusion from donor funding pipelines. The literature urges greater recognition of these models, suggesting that youth innovation holds the key to adaptive, locally rooted reintegration strategies – particularly in megacities like Lagos, where traditional models may no longer suffice. Additionally, youth integration intersects strongly with digital and urban economies. Returnee youth are disproportionately affected by urban unemployment, gang vulnerability, and informal housing challenges. Yet, they are also the most likely to engage with technology, form networks, and explore trans-local identities. This dual reality demands tailored reintegration programming that addresses both risk and resilience – what UNDP (1994) referred to as the capability to withstand shocks and seize opportunity.

Reintegration, especially when facilitated by NSAs, depends not only on service delivery but on the willingness of returnees to engage with formal systems – courts, health clinics, vocational centers, and civil society structures. Where public trust is low – due to corruption, abuse, or inefficiency – returnees may avoid these systems altogether, relying instead on informal networks or underground economies. Trust is both a cause and an effect of reintegration. NSAs that maintain a long-term presence in communities, hire locally, and practice participatory governance are more likely to enjoy trust and therefore to sustain reintegration outcomes. Conversely, donor-funded, short-term actors often struggle to build this trust, especially in communities that view outside organizations as extractive or performative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This calls for a deeper rethinking of reintegration as not just a policy project, but a relational process, built on accountability, humility, and mutual respect.

To conceptually synthesize, this study reveals that reintegration is multidimensional (requiring attention to economic, social, psychological, legal, and cultural domains), non-linear (unfolding in waves, with setbacks, transitions, and new aspirations along the way), situated (shaped by local norms, institutions, actors, and histories), and relational (dependent on trust, networks, and social capital more than institutional checklists). By drawing on field evidence and scholarly frameworks, the

study seeks to illuminate how non-state actors craft, improvise, and contest reintegration amid constraints, contradictions, and hopes for transformation.

Research Question

This study is guided by the main question: ‘What are the roles and engagements of State and Non-State Actors in the Reintegration of Returnees in Lagos State, Nigeria?’ This question seeks to explore the extent, nature, and effectiveness of the interventions carried out by various stakeholders—including governmental institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners—in facilitating the sustainable reintegration of returnees within the context of Lagos State, Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design anchored in a survey approach, with emphasis on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and desk review of organizational documents. The goal is to examine the engagement of non-state actors (NSAs) in the reintegration of returnees in Lagos State, Nigeria. The state was purposively selected for this study because of its peculiarity as the destination city for migrants and returnees and an entry point for returnees in Nigeria. A total of seven (7) key informant interviews were conducted with state and non-state actors. These included staff of Migrant Resource Centre, Lagos, a staff of Lagos State Ministry of Women Affairs, four different Non-State Actors - ISAFE (1 respondent who had been working with the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) for 5 years as a programme manager), WARDC (2 respondents who have been working with the NGO for 5 years as a Deputy Director -Admin and a Program Officer), Girls Inspired Development Network (1 respondent who had been working with the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) for 3 years as a programme manager), Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON = 1 respondent who had been working with the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) for 10 years as a Director of Programmes).

The choice of a qualitative strategy aligns with the study's focus on understanding nuanced institutional practices, subjective experiences, and contextual dynamics that shape reintegration processes (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2018). Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, variations, and contradictions across the interviews and documents. Ethical clearance was obtained from the researchers' host institutions. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. The study adhered to ethical standards for qualitative research in migration and gender-sensitive contexts (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

Results

This study explored the reintegration models and operational dynamics of four key non-state actors (NSAs) in Lagos State—WARDC, WOCON, ISAFE, and GIDN—through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), organizational documents, and field observations. Each organization demonstrates a unique operational niche, target demographic, and reintegration approach as highlighted below:

WARDC – Gender, Legal Empowerment, and Trauma Recovery

The Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC) occupies a central space in the legal and psychosocial reintegration landscape in Lagos. Founded in response to rising cases of gender-based violence and systemic impunity, WARDC's reintegration programme centers on trauma-informed therapy, legal aid clinics, and community mediation forums for returnee women and girls, particularly those trafficked or deported from Europe and North Africa. A KII respondent explained that their organization prioritizes 'restoring dignity and personhood' for women whose identities and bodies were commodified during irregular migration. WARDC does this by offering group counseling sessions, access to female lawyers and paralegals, and assistance with reclaiming legal identity documents—all crucial for securing jobs, education, or housing. WARDC's approach exemplifies the Human Security paradigm, which underscores the interdependence of legal, emotional, and economic safety. Lack of funding for long-term psychosocial support, absence of halfway housing, and limited state collaboration in prosecuting traffickers were identified as key challenges that often stall or reverse reintegration progress, especially when legal action threatens family cohesion or local power dynamics.

WOCON – Paralegal Support, Community Sensitization, and Reintegration Policy Advocacy

The Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON) applies a rights-based and advocacy-heavy approach to reintegration. The organization focuses on paralegal training, grassroots legal education, and anti-stigma campaigns within religious, traditional, and urban communities. While they provide legal aid like WARDC, WOCON distinguishes itself through its involvement with faith leaders and cultural mediators to reduce resistance to returnee acceptance. A respondent described their reintegration strategy as 'community-first, rights-protected.' WOCON's use of mobile legal caravans—pop-up legal aid desks stationed in high-risk communities—also increases accessibility. These activities underscore the legal empowerment strand of feminist reintegration theory: building legal literacy, challenging institutional bias, and expanding access to justice (de Regt et al., 2019). Case overload, donor restrictions, and the high emotional toll on paralegals constrain impact. Also, religious backlash—particularly when addressing women's bodily autonomy—remains a persistent threat.

ISAFE – Youth Reintegration through Digital and Entrepreneurial Pathways

The Initiative for a Sustainable and Accountable Future for Empowerment (ISAFE) targets young returnees, especially those repatriated from detention centres in Libya, Oman, and the UAE. These individuals often lack formal education but possess informal digital skills acquired through diasporic hustling—freelancing, graphic design, dropshipping, or cryptocurrency trading. ISAFE's reintegration model blends digital literacy, vocational reskilling, and business incubation. Through partnerships with tech firms and returnee networks, they train participants in mobile money operations (POS services), basic coding and web design, freelancing via Upwork/Fiverr, eCommerce and micro-trading, and digital safety

and financial fraud prevention. ISAFE exemplifies the Aspirations-capabilities model in action, translating returnees' informal aspirations into tangible, marketable capabilities. However, the organization faces several challenges: poor internet infrastructure, inconsistent electricity, and competition from better-funded NGOs. Some youth drop out of the programme due to mental health issues, lack of food, or housing instability – all of which lie beyond ISAFE's service mandate.

GIDN – Gender, SRH, and Returnee Leadership

Girls Inspired Development Network (GIDN) applies an innovative, girl-centred reintegration model that combines sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education, entrepreneurship training, and narrative-based psychosocial healing. Their primary beneficiaries are adolescent and young adult female returnees, many of whom escaped domestic servitude, trafficking, or early marriage abroad. GIDN's reintegration begins with 'self-reclamation,' using peer-led storytelling, group journaling, and menstrual dignity kits to rebuild confidence. They then transition returnees into skill-building tracks: hairdressing, organic soap-making, food processing, or boutique sales. A portion of beneficiaries are placed in internship programmes with female-led businesses. GIDN's model is deeply aligned with intersectional feminism and youth-led empowerment. It addresses reintegration at the intersection of body, identity, and economics. However, the organization relies heavily on volunteers, lacks a permanent facility, and receives minimal core funding. Participants also face external stigma when trying to rejoin school, rent apartments, or join religious fellowships.

Discussion of Key Findings

The findings, when situated within the study's theoretical frameworks, reveal complex dynamics at the intersection of reintegration, gender, trauma, and institutional governance. The Aspirations-Capabilities model (Carling, 2008), Human Security theory (UNDP, 1994), and intersectional feminist legal theory (Crenshaw, 2021) collectively illuminate the structural and relational elements shaping reintegration outcomes.

Reintegration as Human Security: Beyond Economic Support

All four NSAs adopt multi-dimensional interventions that reflect the Human Security paradigm, addressing emotional, legal, and economic vulnerabilities simultaneously. WARDC's emphasis on trauma-informed care and identity documentation exemplifies a rights-based reconstruction of personal security. However, the lack of safe houses and insufficient state support exposes the fragility of reintegration when structural support is missing. GIDN's narrative therapy and menstrual dignity initiatives underscore the idea that security also involves bodily autonomy and social belonging, not just physical safety.

Aspirations vs. Capabilities: The Youth Paradox

ISAFE's work with youth returnees highlights the tension between *aspirations* and *capabilities*. Many beneficiaries possess informal digital skills but lack institutional

bridges to formalize them into stable livelihoods. Limited access to internet, electricity, and seed capital impairs the conversion of ambition into opportunity. This supports Carling's (2008) proposition that unfulfilled aspirations can result in psychological stagnation and re-migration temptations.

Intersectional Legal Empowerment and Feminist Praxis

WOCON and WARDC's legal empowerment strategies engage Crenshaw's (2021) intersectional feminist lens. Their work illustrates how reintegration policies should account for overlapping gender, class, religion, and migration history. However, backlash from religious institutions and traditional powerholders reveals the friction between human rights discourse and entrenched patriarchal norms. Furthermore, the emotional toll on female paralegals and field staff suggests a feminized burden of reintegration work itself.

Stigma, Silence, and the Gendered Politics of Reintegration

Stigma emerged as a pervasive social barrier, often eclipsing economic or legal constraints. Returnees conceal their migration histories, fearing judgment, rejection, or moral condemnation. Female returnees are labelled as promiscuous; male returnees are stigmatized as failed breadwinners or ex-convicts. Notably, male-specific trauma remains invisible in programming, reinforcing patriarchal norms that suppress vulnerability. This aligns with global literature on masculinity and migration trauma, underscoring a critical blind spot in reintegration design.

Community Trust and Ethical Embeddedness

The concept of 'ethical embeddedness' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) is central to NSA-community relations. Organizations such as GIDN and ISAFE rely heavily on local dialects, long-term relationships, and grassroots volunteers to penetrate hostile or skeptical communities. WOCON's engagement with religious figures enhances message legitimacy, while WARDC's legal clinics face resistance when perceived as externally imposed or threatening family authority. Reintegration, therefore, should be relational, rooted in cultural fluency and trust, not just programme delivery.

Structural Urban Fragility and Spatial Exclusion

Lagos's urban geography complicates reintegration. Many returnees live in precarious housing—shared rooms, abandoned structures, or informal settlements—making them vulnerable to exploitation, eviction, or state violence. Without safe, stable housing, even the best reintegration programme falters. This urban fragility is not accidental but reflects the structural violence of policy neglect and market exclusion, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability.

Policy Disconnect and Governance Gaps

A critical institutional insight is the disconnect between NSAs and state governance structures. None of the studied organizations are embedded in migration policy planning or monitoring despite their central operational roles. This fragmentation leads to discontinuities in service provision, data loss, and risk exposure. Stock et al.

(2020) argued that such actors are treated as subcontractors, not co-strategists—a finding echoed across the study. A transition to c-governance—where NSAs participate in strategy formulation—is essential for sustainable reintegration outcomes.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E): The Evidence Gap

All four NSAs reported challenges in evaluating long-term reintegration success. While digital innovations such as WhatsApp trackers or Google Forms offer partial solutions, infrastructural gaps and donor pressures undermine systematic learning. Donor metrics prioritize outputs over outcomes, making it difficult to assess returnees' social well-being or mental health after programme exit. This disconnect between reintegration theory and practice risks perpetuating ineffective interventions.

Gendered Burdens of Reintegration and the Double Marginalization of Women

While stigma and male invisibility are already highlighted, a deeper gendered analysis reveals that female returnees bear a disproportionate burden of reintegration, compounded by both their migration experience and the patriarchal structures of the return communities. Unlike male returnees, whose struggles are often rendered invisible, women are hyper-visible and subjected to intense moral judgment. WARDC and WOCON noted that even economically empowered female returnees face community rejection, partner abandonment, or are seen as 'spoiled'. In some cases, returnees who survived sexual exploitation abroad face victim-blaming and are denied inheritance, childcare support, or social reintegration in their families.

Moreover, women are overrepresented in caregiving roles, yet underrepresented in the design of reintegration programmes. This double marginalization—first as returnees, then as women—requires an intersectional framework that goes beyond trauma support to include reproductive health services, gender justice mechanisms, and economic autonomy pathways. Failure to address this reinforces cycles of return migration or underground survival economies.

Theoretical and Conceptual Synthesis

The findings of this study demonstrate that non-state actors (NSAs) in Lagos State have developed diverse, grounded, and responsive models for reintegrating returnees. Their interventions—though constrained—offer empirical support for several theoretical models explored in the literature review. These include Carling's Aspirations-Capabilities framework, the Human Security paradigm, intersectional feminist theory, and community-based legal empowerment approaches.

First, the data strongly aligns with the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework (Carling, 2008), which asserts that reintegration depends not simply on a returnee's aspirations, but on their real ability to act on them. Organizations like ISAFE and GIDN provide training that aligns with returnees' aspirations (entrepreneurship,

dignity, digital skills), but these aspirations are often unrealized due to structural barriers—housing precarity, stigma, and psychological distress. For example, a returnee trained in digital marketing by ISAFE dropped out due to homelessness and mental breakdown, highlighting the mismatch between aspiration and capability in the absence of holistic support. This affirms Carling's position that migration policy should be redesigned to remove capability-blocking obstacles, not merely expand training opportunities. Second, the work of WARDC, WOCON, and GIDN exemplifies the Human Security framework (UNDP, 1994), which extends security beyond the state to the individual, emphasizing psychological safety, bodily integrity, legal identity, and personal agency. These NSAs tackle multiple forms of insecurity—legal (evictions, abuse), economic (livelihoods), psychological (trauma), and social (stigma). The evidence also supports the argument that reintegration success is determined by how safety and dignity are restored, not just economic output. NSAs that adopt trauma-informed and survivor-centered models tend to report more sustainable reintegration than those focused only on vocational training.

Third, this study amplifies the value of intersectional feminist analysis. WARDC and GIDN, in particular, offer gender-transformative reintegration strategies, working to dismantle the patriarchal norms that exclude or punish female returnees. They recognize that female returnees face unique risks: sexual violence, reproductive stigma, blame for migration 'failure,' and exclusion from inheritance or child custody rights. Their work aligns with Crenshaw's (1989) assertions that effective reintegration cannot ignore gender. Rather than treating females as a vulnerable group, these organizations frame returnee females as rights-bearers and change agents. They train paralegals, amplify survivor stories, and promote menstrual dignity entrepreneurship, thus fostering structural transformation, not just social rehabilitation. Lastly, the findings validate the value of community-rooted legal empowerment. WOCON's engagement of religious leaders, WARDC's community mediation forums, and GIDN's peer mentorship model reflect Kleist and Vammen's (2012) emphasis on participatory, relational reintegration.

Implications for Reintegration Policy in Nigeria

This study provides new empirical evidence to guide reintegration policy and practice in Nigeria. Several policy-relevant insights emerged as follows:

NSAs as Primary Reintegration Actors: The study shows that in Lagos, NSAs, not government agencies, are the primary reintegration actors. They fundraise, design, implement, and evaluate reintegration services in the absence of coordinated state frameworks. This presents a paradox: the actors doing the most have the least policy power. To remedy this, the Federal Government should formally institutionalize NSA roles in reintegration governance through policy inclusion, funding mechanisms, and inter-agency task forces.

Reintegration as Multidimensional: Evidence across all four organizations shows that reintegration is not unidirectional or purely economic. It is legal (identity papers, housing rights, family law), psychosocial (trauma support, dignity restoration), cultural (stigma reduction, storytelling, faith inclusion), and structural (housing access, digital infrastructure, safe transit). Programmes that target only vocational

training or financial aid without addressing these broader dimensions tend to report short-lived reintegration outcomes, often followed by re-migration, destitution, or incarceration.

Gender and Youth Inclusion should be Centralized: Reintegration programmes often serve under-served women and youth, yet these groups make up a significant portion of returnees. GIDN and WARDC provide evidence that youth-and gender-centred programmes yield a higher impact when rooted in bodily autonomy, peer-led models, and structural empowerment. This finding aligns with the UNDP's (2016) call for intersectional reintegration planning. The National Migration Policy, 2015, and the Revised National Youth Policy, 2019, should be updated to include gender-transformative and youth-driven reintegration tools, developed with NSAs' consultations.

Housing and Data Systems as Urgently Needed: All organizations studied emphasized that housing fragility and data gaps are critical bottlenecks. Without safe, affordable housing, returnees risk exposure, re-trauma, or marginalization. Without interoperable databases, programmes duplicate services, miss vulnerable populations, or fail to track outcomes. A Lagos State Returnee Shelter Initiative (LSRSI) could be piloted by leveraging NSAs and government collaborations. Additionally, a National Reintegration Register could be co-managed by the NCFRMI and NSAs platforms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has critically examined the roles and contributions of non-state actors (NSAs) in the reintegration of returnees within Lagos State, Nigeria. Drawing on empirical data from four NSAs, the study highlights the transformative potential of grassroots, gender-responsive, and contextually grounded interventions in return migration governance. These NSAs operate in environments marked by deep socioeconomic inequality, policy fragmentation, and public stigma, yet they continue to provide essential reintegration services through legal empowerment, trauma support, vocational training, and community-based advocacy.

The findings reveal that NSAs are often the first and most consistent points of contact for returnees, particularly in urban areas where state presence is weak or absent. Their work demonstrates that reintegration is a multidimensional process encompassing psychological healing, social acceptance, economic independence, and legal protection. Moreover, these organizations have innovated beyond conventional models by integrating digital livelihoods, reproductive health education, and survivor-led storytelling into their approaches, thereby reaffirming the relevance of theories such as the Aspirations-Capabilities framework, human security paradigm, and intersectional feminism in African migration research.

However, the study also uncovers critical limitations. Most NSAs operate within minimal or episodic funding, lack formal partnerships with state institutions, and face significant data and monitoring challenges. Reintegration efforts are further undermined by persistent stigma against returnees, limited access to affordable housing, and the absence of a coordinated national strategy that meaningfully

incorporates non-state actors into migration governance frameworks. To enhance the sustainability and impact of reintegration programmes in Nigeria, the study recommends several policy and programmatic shifts. First, there is an urgent need for the Federal government to formally recognize and integrate NSAs into reintegration policy development and implementation through a dedicated national steering committee. This would ensure that reintegration programmes are informed by local expertise and community-level realities. Second, the development of a standalone National Reintegration Strategy, distinct from broader migration policy, is necessary to provide a coherent and standardized framework for intervention, accountability, and evaluation. Furthermore, reintegration efforts should be explicitly gender-sensitive and youth-inclusive. Given that returnee populations are increasingly young and female, policies should prioritize access to reproductive health, mental health services, and safe housing while dismantling patriarchal structures that limit females' post-return autonomy. NSAs such as GIDN and WARDC have already laid the groundwork for such gender-transformative programming, and their models should be scaled with institutional and financial support.

The digital economy also presents an untapped opportunity for enhancing returnee resilience. Organizations like ISAFE have demonstrated that with the right training and infrastructure, returnees can thrive in digital marketplaces and entrepreneurial ecosystems. Thus, public and private sector investment in digital skill-building and mobile-friendly business incubation should become a central feature of reintegration planning.

Data infrastructure and monitoring systems remain the foundation for progress. A centralized, interoperable returnee database—co-managed by government and trusted NSA networks—would dramatically improve programme coordination, reduce duplication, and enable longitudinal tracking of returnee outcomes. Similarly, donor agencies should reconsider their funding models to support long-term, core financing for NSAs rather than short-term, logframe-driven projects that discourage innovation and sustainability.

Finally, reintegration should be understood not merely as a logistical or developmental goal but also as a process of social healing and justice. This entails public education campaigns to reduce stigma, community engagement to foster inclusion, and institutional reforms that elevate returnee voices in governance spaces. Reintegration should restore not only livelihoods but also dignity, rights, and belonging. In this regard, the experiences of Lagos-based NSAs offer both a blueprint and a challenge: to build a reintegration system that centers humanity, equity, and local agency.

References

- Afolayan, A. (2009). *Migration in Nigeria: A country profile 2009*. International Organization for Migration.
- Bakewell, O. (2013). 'Keeping them in their place': The ambivalent relationship between development and migration in Africa. In *Globalisation and Migration* (pp. 112-129). Routledge.

-
- Carling, J. R. (2008). The human dynamics of migrant transnationalism. *Ethnic and racial studies*, 31(8), 1452-1477.
- Collins, F. L., & Carling, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Aspiration, Desire and the Drivers of Migration*. Routledge.
- Chikanda, A., & Tawodzera, G. (2017). *Informal entrepreneurship and cross-border trade between Zimbabwe and South Africa* (No. 74). Southern African Migration Programme.
- Clemens, M. A., & Ogden, T. (2014). Migration as a strategy for household finance: a research agenda on remittances, payments, and development. *Center for Global Development Working Paper*, (354).
- Crenshaw, K. W. (2021). Demarginalising the intersection of race and sex. *Cahiers du Genre*, 70(1), 21-49.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Dustmann, C., & Weiss, Y. (2007). Return migration: theory and empirical evidence from the UK. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 45(2), 236-256.
- de Regt, M. C., Grabska, K., & Del Franco, N. (2016). Time to Look at Girls: Adolescent Girls' Migration in the South.
- Grabska, K., de Regt, M., & Del Franco, N. (2019). *Adolescent girls' migration in the global South: Transitions into adulthood*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frowd, P. M. (2018). *Security at the borders: Transnational practices and technologies in West Africa*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kleist, N., & Vammen, I. (2012). *Diaspora groups and development in fragile situations: Lessons learnt* (No. 2012: 09). DIIS Report.
- Kuschminder, K. (2017). Taking stock of assisted voluntary return from Europe: decision making, reintegration and sustainable return—time for a paradigm shift. *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. RSCAS*, 31.
- Sinatti, G., & Horst, C. (2015). Migrants as agents of development: Diaspora engagement discourse and practice in Europe. *Ethnicities*, 15(1), 134-152.
- Stock, I., Üstübeci, A., & Schultz, S. U. (2019). Externalization at work: responses to migration policies from the Global South. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7, 1-9.
- Todaro, M. P. (1969). A model of labor migration and urban unemployment in less developed countries. *The American Economic Review*, 59(1), 138-148.
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of nursing scholarship*, 33(1), 93-96.
- UNDP, U. (1994). Human development report 1994: New dimensions of human security. New York.
- Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Sage Publications.
-

Publisher's Note/Disclaimer: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of NJH. NJH disclaims responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.