



GUIDANCE FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE REINTEGRATION SERVICES FOR MIGRANT WOMEN RETURNEES

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GLOSSARY

The definitions for terms in this glossary are from IOM, International Migration Law No. 34 – [Glossary on Migration \(IOM, 2019\)](#), unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR): Administrative, logistical or financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants who are unable or unwilling to remain in the host or transit country and who decide to return to their country of origin.¹

Country of destination: A country that is the destination for a person or a group of persons, irrespective of whether they migrate regularly or irregularly (see also ‘host country’ below).

Country of origin: A country of nationality or former habitual residence of a person or group of persons who have migrated abroad, irrespective of whether they migrate regularly or irregularly.

Country of transit: A country through which a person or a group of persons passes on any journey to the country of destination or from the country of destination to the country of origin or habitual residence.

Forced return: The act of returning an individual, against their will, to the country of origin, transit or a third country that agrees to receive them, generally carried out based on an administrative or judicial act or decision.

Gender: The socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for individuals based on the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender-based violence: Refers to harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private.²

Gender equality: Refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of all people. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of all genders are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups. Gender equality is not a women’s issue but should concern and fully engage all genders.³

Gender-responsive: The term, gender-responsive, is usually encountered in conjunction with another word (e.g. gender-responsive governance, strategies or treatments) and refers to the consistent, systematic attention to gender-based differences and inequalities between women and men, with a view to addressing systemic and structural constraints to gender equality, as well as the underlying causes of gender inequality, discrimination and exclusion. Gender-responsive laws, policies, programmes, services and other inputs are formulated, planned and delivered in a manner that facilitates the achievement of gender equality.⁴

1. Note: In the context of assisted voluntary return and reintegration, voluntariness is assumed to exist if two conditions apply: (a) freedom of choice, which is defined by the absence of physical or psychological pressure to enrol in an assisted voluntary return and reintegration programme; and (b) an informed decision which requires the availability of timely, unbiased and reliable information upon which to base the decision. In some cases, an assessment may be needed by qualified professionals to determine the extent to which a person is capable to take such a free and informed decision, and who, should the person lack such a capacity, could legally take the decision on their behalf. Assisted voluntary return programmes may provide different levels of assistance to reintegration, and, in some cases, they do not provide any assistance to this effect.

2. IOM subscribes to the IASC definition: ‘Gender-based violence’ is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females.

3. Adapted from UN Women, [Handbook on Gender Mainstreaming for Gender Equality Results](#) (UN Women, 2022).

4. Ibid., citing UN E/RES/1997/66.

Gender transformative: Refers to development projects, programmes and policies in which gender mainstreaming is utilized to design and implement activities that attempt to redefine gender roles and relations and promote positive gender equality results, as well as approaches, practices and interventions that are planned and implemented in a manner intended to lead to positive transformation and the intended gender equality results.⁵

Host country: In the context of returns, the term is used, as opposed to 'country of origin' and as an alternative to 'country of destination' (refer to terms in this glossary) or 'sending country' to provide clarity in the identification of the various countries involved. In other contexts, the term 'host country' is generally best avoided, as it may imply a particular relationship between migrants ('guests') and natives ('hosts') which may be misleading and could undermine the integration of migrants.

Migrants in vulnerable situations: Persons who are effectively unable to enjoy their human rights, are at increased risk of violations and abuse, and who, accordingly, are entitled to call on a duty bearer's heightened duty of care. Migrants are not inherently vulnerable, but they can find themselves in vulnerable situations arising from the reasons for leaving their country of origin, the circumstances in which they travel or the conditions they face on arrival, or because of personal circumstances such as their age, disability or health status.⁶

SOGIESC: An acronym for sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, which groups these distinct but related terms together for ease of use, to describe the factors that make some people different than others ('diverse') and subject to discrimination and exclusion.

Reintegration: A multidimensional process enabling individuals to re-establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity and achieve inclusion in civic life.⁷

Return migration: In the context of international migration, the movement of persons returning to their country of origin after having moved away from their place of habitual residence and crossed an international border. In the context of internal migration, the movement of persons returning to their place of habitual residence after having moved away from it.

Right to return: An element of the right to freedom of movement entailing that everyone shall be free to return to one's own country.

Sexual exploitation: Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.

Sustainable reintegration: Reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity.

5. Ibid.

6. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "[Differentiation between migrants and refugees](#)". *Migrants and Refugees: Addressing Human Rights and Migration* (Geneva: OHCHR, 2018)

7. Note: The various components of reintegration can be described as follows. **Social reintegration** implies access by a returning migrant to public services and infrastructures in their country of origin, including access to health, education, housing, justice and social protection programmes. **Psychosocial reintegration** is the reinsertion of a returning migrant into personal support networks (friends, relatives, neighbours) and civil society structures (associations, self-help groups and other organizations). This also includes the re-engagement with the values, mores, way of living, language, moral principles, ideology and traditions of the country of origin's society. **Economic reintegration** is the process by which a returning migrant re-enters the economic life of their country of origin and is able to sustain a livelihood.

Trafficking in persons: The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.⁸

Trans/transgender: Terms used by some people whose gender identity differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. Trans, transgender and non-binary are ‘umbrella terms’ representing a variety of words that describe an internal sense of gender that differs from the sex assigned at birth and the gender attributed to the individual by society, whether that individual identifies as a man, a woman, simply ‘trans’ or ‘transgender’ with another gender or with no gender.⁹

Violence against women: Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

Voluntary return: The assisted or independent return to the country of origin, transit or another country based on the voluntary decision of the returnee, free from any pressure or coercive measures and informed by all available information about the risks and benefits of return.

Vulnerability (in migration): The limited capacity to avoid, resist, cope with or recover from harm. This limited capacity results from the unique interactions of individual, household, community and structural characteristics and conditions.

Rights-based approach: This approach seeks to empower migrants to claim and avail themselves of their rights as enshrined in relevant bodies of international law, while also strengthening the capacity of governments as duty bearers in their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil those rights. Crucially, taking a rights-based approach means placing the concerned individual(s) and their well-being at the centre of every decision or process related to their return, readmission and reintegration, and seeking to uphold the protection of their rights.¹⁰

Survivor-centred approach: This approach places the rights, dignity and agency of survivors at the core of all interventions. It emphasizes safety, confidentiality, informed consent and empowerment, ensuring that survivors guide decisions affecting their recovery and protection.

Psychosocially informed approach: A psychosocially informed approach aims at making sure any intervention reinforces well-being and does not create psychological harm. Through a psychosocially informed approach, interventions are designed based on the understanding of the impacts of distress and other mental health conditions on a person, to promote a sense of psychological safety, support a sense of active control and decision-making, enable social connectedness, ensure cultural competency and avoid possible re-traumatization or emotional harm. It includes but is not limited to a trauma-informed approach, since the distress and psychological difficulties people face can be due to various reasons and not be only traumatic in nature.

8. United Nations General Assembly [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#), Article 3 (55/25 of 15 November 2000).

9. International Organization for Migration (IOM), [SOGIESC Full Glossary of Terms](#) (IOM, 2020).

10. IOM, [IOM's Policy on the Full Spectrum of Return, Readmission and Reintegration](#) (IOM, 2021).

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THIS GUIDE

This guidance document has been developed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UN Women for practitioners supporting women in return and reintegration¹¹ programmes worldwide. It targets service providers assisting returnee women in reintegration to their countries of origin or to a country where the individual holds legal residency, including but not limited to, those working in government offices, civil society, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organizations. It complements existing practices and policies including UN Women's 'Making Migration Safe for Women' programme and IOM's [Policy on the Full Spectrum of Return, Readmission and Reintegration](#).

Gender-responsive approaches must be comprehensive, adopting methods that appropriately meet the needs of different population groups – in this case, women returning to reintegrate into their respective communities or countries of origin. These approaches should always be grounded in human rights, prioritizing women's safety, dignity, and individual needs and vulnerabilities throughout the return and reintegration process.

Achieving sustainable, gender-responsive reintegration requires a holistic approach that encompasses policy development, structural reforms and community mobilization. At the same time, individual-level reintegration assistance remains essential, often serving as a vital lifeline for returnees.

This document aims to guide service providers who support women throughout reintegration assistance processes. It showcases good practices of approaches that prioritize safe, dignified and

sustainable reintegration of migrant women returnees. **This guidance document contains two sections:** The first presents an overview of women returnees' experiences, drawing on desk research and other forms of secondary data to highlight key concerns and challenges they may face during return and reintegration; the second offers practical guidance for delivering gender-responsive reintegration support to women returnees at the individual level.

This guide aligns with IOM's Reintegration Handbook, which describes the institution's integrated approach to reintegration, operating across three levels of support: **individual, community and structural**. Within each level, it addresses three dimensions of reintegration: economic, social and psychosocial.

At the individual level, which this guide expands on, the assistance includes **economic reintegration**, which supports returnees establish economic self-sufficiency upon their return; **social reintegration**, which facilitates access to services such as housing, education, legal, health, food, water and other public infrastructure; and **psychosocial assistance**, which addresses returnees' psychological well-being (including emotional, behavioural and cultural aspects) and their capacity to (re)form positive social relationships and networks and cope with (re)migration drivers.¹²

This guide specifically promotes a gender-responsive approach to **individual-level reintegration assistance**. It is intended for practitioners working in the field and aims to support the **sustainable reintegration of returnee women and their households**. It aligns with the broader objectives of gender-responsive migration governance by tailoring assistance to women's specific needs, challenges and capacities, while

11. 'Reintegration' is used throughout this guide because not all returnees may have returned to their place of habitual residence, especially in the case of international migration, where they may merely have returned to their country of origin.

12. IOM, [Reintegration Handbook: Practical guidance on the design, implementation and monitoring of reintegration assistance](#) (IOM, 2019).

recognizing their agency, strategies and potential during reintegration. It also encourages service providers to build partnerships with local and national organizations working to advance gender equality and women's rights.

A gender-responsive approach to reintegration assistance requires practitioners to proactively identify and address the barriers and exclusions women face as a result of existing gender inequalities – both within their communities and as a result of their migration experiences. This approach includes addressing societal attitudes, stereotypes and biases against returnee women that can influence the type and level of support they receive, both formal and informal.¹³

Practitioners can advance this approach through practical actions, such as gender sensitization training for service providers, highlighting multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that women may encounter at all stages of migration, with a focus on return migration. In collaboration with primary duty bearers, service providers should prioritize migrant returnees' well-being, access to services, job opportunities and available support for their reintegration to reduce exposure to gendered challenges, including risks to personal safety and exposure to discriminatory treatment.

LIMITATIONS

This guide has been developed from a general, global perspective and does not fully reflect the unique realities of every context, including economic conditions. It is intended to be a living document and should be adapted to national and local contexts to ensure relevance and successful implementation. While the primary focus is on supporting returnee women at the individual level, community and structural levels of interventions¹⁴ should complement this guidance, recognizing that reintegration is multidimensional and requires a holistic approach to address restrictive gender norms, policies and potential systemic barriers to accessing services.

The guide further recognizes that all individuals face distinct challenges and experiences during return and reintegration based on their gender. Practitioners should take into account these differences when designing and implementing responses. The primary focus of this guidance is the experiences of cisgender women.¹⁵ While it contains some references to transgender and non-binary persons, its current scope is limited.

As this is a living document, there is the intention to eventually expand this guidance to address the distinct needs of all individuals and apply strategies that promote inclusivity across reintegration programmes.



13. Formal support refers to social assistance provided by the state or an equivalent. Informal support includes support from their family, community and social networks.

14. Please see [IOM's Reintegration Handbook](#)'s **MODULE 3** for Reintegration Assistance at the Community Level and **MODULE 4** for Reintegration Assistance at the Structural Level.

15. 'Cisgender' refers to a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.



1

OVERVIEW OF THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN RETURNEES

GENDER, MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION¹⁶

Gender shapes all stages of migration, in countries of origin, transit and destination.¹⁷ Women migrate for various reasons, including to seek better economic, educational and life opportunities, reunite with family members, or escape conflict, environmental disasters and entrenched structural gender inequalities. In many instances, gender and intersectional inequalities limit migrant women's full enjoyment of human rights and hinder their access to critical services in host and transit countries, such as access to health, psychological assistance, protection, shelter, justice and livelihood support.¹⁸ The decision to return can be influenced by gender norms and power dynamics within a family, community and other social structures.¹⁹ Equally, gendered structural factors in countries of destination, transit and origin such as gender inequalities in labour markets and employment, and gender discriminatory laws and policies, can influence decisions to return.

Women returnees experience specific challenges and, in some situations, overlapping vulnerabilities.²⁰ Data indicate that women and girls are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence and discriminatory practices at all stages of migration.²¹ For many migrant women, return migration is accompanied by stigma, loss of autonomy or fears of restrictive norms, discrimination or domestic violence. Women who experience forced return are at heightened risk of exposure to gender-based violence. They may face barriers to safely returning and reintegrating into

society due to a lack of preparedness to respond to the harm they have suffered or are at risk of experiencing. Studies show that such experiences may result in stigma, family and community rejection, and exacerbate an individual's vulnerability and exposure to risks.

For example, women returning to Ethiopia after performing domestic or care work abroad often face intensified stigma rooted in intersectional discrimination based on gender and class. Domestic work is frequently viewed as an extension of traditional gender roles and is therefore often undervalued, particularly because it is carried out in private, unregulated settings where risks of exploitation and abuse are hidden from view.²²

Women returnees may encounter multiple and intersecting barriers in accessing adequate information about their rights, entitlements and the official procedures for accessing services and support.²³ These barriers are often due to service providers and communication mechanisms not adequately accommodating diverse literacy levels, language needs or accessible modes of communication. Some women may face individual challenges accessing digital platforms and other communication networks, while others may face deliberate restrictions or misinformation, further hindering their ability to access support. Gender-specific factors commonly compound these challenges.

In Ethiopia, for instance, women returning from the Middle East and Gulf countries frequently encounter harsh judgement from families and

16. IOM, [World Migration Report 2024](#) (IOM, 2024).

17. Ibid., [Chapter 6](#); UN Women, [Policy and Practice: A Guide for Gender-Responsive Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration](#) (New York, UN Women, 2018).

18. UN Women, [Racially Marginalized Migrant Women: Human Rights Abuses at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Migration](#) (New York, UN Women, 2022).

19. S.R. Curran and A.C. Saguy, "Migration and Cultural Change: A Role for Gender and Social Networks?" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 2(3): 54–77 (2013).

20. United Nations Economic and Social Council, [Empowerment and Equality for Migrant Women and Girls: Progress and Opportunities in the Economic Commission for Europe Region](#). Note by the International Organization for Migration (ECE/AC.28/2024/8 of 12 August 2024).

21. Ibid.; S. Hall and IOM, [Mapping and research to strengthen protection and assistance measures for migrants with diverse SOGIESC](#) (Geneva, IOM, 2023).

22. UN Women, [The Positive Contributions of Migrant Women in Ethiopia](#) (New York, UN Women, 2026).

23. UN Women, [Leaving No-one Behind: Access to Social Protection for All Migrant Women](#). Policy Brief No. 14 (New York, UN Women, 2020).

communities. Those who return without financial success are often judged most severely. At the same time, financially successful returnees may be suspected of acquiring resources through ‘morally questionable’ means, and are criticized for perceived violations of cultural expectations around marriage, motherhood and behaviour, which can negatively influence reintegration outcomes.²⁴ Stigmatization and exclusion can further restrict women’s access to essential services, livelihood opportunities and family and community-based support systems. Women who have experienced trafficking in persons or gender-based violence, including those returning pregnant or as single mothers with children, may be particularly vulnerable to marginalization and require tailored support to ensure their safe and dignified reintegration into communities.

While recent decades have shown an increase in the numbers of women migrating independently in search of better economic and life opportunities,²⁵ in some contexts migrant women continue to be classified by host countries as dependents of a male relative who they have travelled with or sponsored their travel. This classification often limits their legal autonomy, restricting their ability to act independently from their spouse, male relative or designated sponsor.²⁶ Such systemic legal dependency poses serious challenges, particularly in cases involving gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence. Women who need to escape an abusive situation may be deterred from doing so due to fears of losing their legal status and facing forced return. These vulnerabilities extend beyond domestic violence to other forms of violence and exploitation, restricting women’s ability to seek protection or redress because of sponsorship

systems, such as the Kafala system, in which a woman’s right to work is tied to a specific employer,²⁷ and migration frameworks that make legal residency conditional on the presence or support of a sponsor.²⁸

Studies show migrant women may be less likely to plan for return to countries of origin. Women can be invested in supporting family and community members in countries of origin through remittances. Women may also be more reluctant to return to their countries of origin because of fears of returning to places with more restrictive gender norms or situations of domestic violence at home.²⁹ Other factors may include concerns over the potential discrimination, social stigma and exclusion they may face upon return.

It is important to note that not all experiences of migrant women in vulnerable situations are negative. Many navigate their journeys with agency, exchange knowledge and skills, develop networks, and contribute to building and sustaining families, communities and economies across borders. Structural inequalities and underlying gender norms continue to lead to the overrepresentation of women in gender-segregated and informal sectors such as care, domestic and service work.³⁰ These sectors are frequently unregulated and lack adequate working conditions and safeguards, including from gender-based violence, labour exploitation and discrimination. Regardless of their status, upon returning to their countries of origin, many women may face limited access to social protection, sustainable economic support, psychosocial services and justice mechanisms, underscoring the need for gender-responsive reintegration assistance.

24. UN Women, [The Positive Contributions of Migrant Women in Ethiopia](#) (New York, UN Women, 2026).

25. UN Women, [Women Migrant Workers’ Contributions to Development Policy](#). Policy Brief No. 2 (New York, UN Women, 2017).

26. UN Women, [Women Working Worldwide: A Situational Analysis of Women Migrant Workers](#). Research Paper (New York, UN Women, 2017).

27. UN Women, [Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders At Risk in Migration Contexts](#). Recommendations (New York, UN Women, 2022).

28. B.L. Nisrane, R. Ossewaarde and A. Need, “The exploitation narratives and coping strategies of Ethiopian women return migrants from the Arabian Gulf” in *Gender, Place & Culture* 27(4): 568–586 (2020).

29. R. King and A. Lulle, “Chapter 4: Gendering Return Migration” in [Handbook of Return Migration](#). R. King and K. Kuschminder (eds). Edward Elgar Publishing: 53–69 (2022).

30. UN Women, “[IOM and UN Women Scale-Up Efforts to Advance Women’s Rights, Protection, and Empowerment in Migration Policies and Humanitarian Responses](#)” (New York, UN Women, 2 October 2024).

BOX 1**Understanding gender-based risks and discrimination**

Women returnees may face heightened violence and discrimination as a result of their migration experiences. They may have faced gender-based violence and discrimination at various stages of their journey, including in countries of transit and destination. These experiences can involve family separation and other stressors that should be carefully considered, given their potential long-term psychosocial effects. Together, these different risks highlight the need for gender-responsive approaches in reintegration support.

Practitioners are expected to be aware of the gender-specific risks and forms of violence that women in their diversity may face at all stages of migration, including transit and return. It is important to recognize how other intersecting social factors, such as on the basis of age, disability, ethnicity and nationality among others may heighten risks of violence. Within this process, it is crucial to recognize that each person's experience is unique, and their capacity to cope will vary which, in turn, influences levels of exposure to risks and protective factors during reintegration.

In order to apply gender-responsive reintegration assistance, practitioners should:

- a. Understand contextual intersecting barriers faced by returnee women, e.g. based on age, social status, ethnic and religious background, gender identity, sexual orientation, health and disability.
- b. Go further to identify specific situational challenges, working collaboratively with each woman to develop tailored mitigation plans.

Adequate resources and capacity-building for staff should be ensured so that each returnee is treated with dignity and provided with tailored support that meets their individual needs. Such an approach is essential for promoting rights-based, safe, dignified and sustainable reintegration.



IT IS CRUCIAL THAT REINTEGRATION PRACTITIONERS ARE AWARE OF THE REALITIES AND EXPERIENCES OF RETURNEE WOMEN AND TAKE THEM INTO ACCOUNT DURING THE PLANNING AND DELIVERY OF REINTEGRATION ASSISTANCE.



2

GUIDELINES ON GENDER- RESPONSIVE REINTEGRATION OF MIGRANT WOMEN

This section outlines key steps in delivering reintegration assistance and explains how to make each step gender-responsive to ensure the meaningful inclusion of migrant women. It provides practical guidance on applying gender-responsive approaches in case management, as well as in the provision of economic, social and psychosocial support, to better address the specific needs, roles and challenges that returnee women may encounter.

Prior to initiating a gender-responsive intervention, it is essential to acknowledge that migrant women's experiences before, during and after migration differ. Some may be survivors of gender-based violence, victims of trafficking in persons or other forms of exploitation, while others may have had positive and empowering experiences. These differences can influence their vulnerabilities, resilience and exposure to harm. Moreover, it is crucial to consider the diverse profiles of women, including their age, nationality, race, ethnicity, education and literacy levels, and social and cultural backgrounds, as well as the type of return (i.e. voluntary versus forced, spontaneous or assisted). These factors can shape their capacity for sustainable reintegration. Implementing an **intersectional gender analysis**,³¹ **conducted with technical gender expertise**, as the basis for designing contextualized reintegration programming is required in all intervention stages to understand the diverse needs of migrant women.

At this stage, a systematic mapping of available services, alongside an assessment of their gender responsiveness, is essential. Establishing strong partnerships with service providers, particularly those with economic, social and psychosocial services should be a priority. Collaborating with organizations led by local women and migrant women is also vital as they hold a crucial role in delivering inclusive and long-term reintegration support.

CASE MANAGEMENT

Case management is essential in supporting migrant returnees and their households in reintegration assistance at the individual level. This is typically carried out by professionals working in governmental departments such as social welfare or social care offices, United Nations agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations, or civil society organizations.

A gender-responsive approach to case management is not a substitute for using existing [Case Management Guidelines](#).³² Rather, it focuses on key aspects that need to be considered to ensure comprehensive assistance to migrant women who need support to sustainably reintegrate into society. This includes, for example, an understanding not only of the psychological, relational and cultural dimensions of return migration, but also of the gendered dimensions that shape the specific needs, vulnerabilities and the overall experiences of migrant women.

A gender-responsive approach to reintegration **requires a baseline assessment of the available case management capacity and resources**, as well as an evaluation of the adequacy of case management for women upon return. **This includes, for example, reviewing the composition of teams to ensure the presence of female staff and specialists in gender-based violence and trafficking in persons, tailored to the specific context.** Promoting diversity in staff backgrounds and expertise is essential to meet the varied needs of migrant women. Equally important is a consistent financial commitment to uphold minimum standards and ensure a continuum of care. Approaches to address needs related to gender and inclusion and return migration may require allocated or additional funds for adapted activities, comprehensive staff training and revisions to standard operating procedures.

31. IOM, [IOM Intersectional Gender Analysis Toolkit](#) (Geneva, IOM, 2024).

32. For additional resources please refer to IOM, [Reintegration Handbook: Practical guidance on the design, implementation and monitoring of reintegration assistance](#) (IOM, 2019).

COUNSELLING IN CASE MANAGEMENT

Counselling is integral to the entire cycle of reintegration assistance, as it helps build trust and rapport with returnee migrants and their communities, supports their overall well-being, and enables the delivery of tailored and effective support that meets their individual needs. Where applicable, counselling can start before migrants return to their country of origin or country of legal residency, as part of pre-departure assistance. Applying a gender-responsive approach at the pre-departure stage is particularly important to ensure rights-based, safe and dignified return. It ensures that counselling assessments are adequately informed, that women's consent to return is based on full and accurate information (including on potential risks), and that post-arrival support is prepared in advance, including mitigation measures when risks are identified.

Practitioners should have the necessary competencies to provide psychological first aid to women with complex conditions and, when needed, refer them to mental health professionals for further counselling support. This requires close collaboration with health and psychosocial experts, including those with additional training or expertise in the gendered dimensions of migration. Ensuring such capacity is essential for the effective implementation of reintegration plans and for addressing the multifaceted needs of migrant women.

POST-ARRIVAL ASSISTANCE

Post-arrival assistance constitutes an initial step in the provision of support to migrants in vulnerable situations returning to their country of origin, typically initiated at airports or other ports of entry. While it may lead to case management support, it is neither a mandatory prerequisite nor a guarantee of case management services. During this stage, migrant women's confirmation of registration details

and vulnerability assessment is initiated. They should receive food and non-food items, including dignity kits, mobile phones and SIM cards; cash-based interventions to address their immediate needs; emergency medical assistance; sexual and reproductive health; psychological first aid and other forms of psychosocial support; support with family tracing and reunification; referrals to temporary shelter for survivors of gender-based violence, victims of trafficking in persons and other persons at risk; and provision of local transportation support.

Where feasible, pre-departure vulnerability assessments of returnee women including family tracing should be conducted, as they would inform the post-arrival support to be provided and be beneficial before the initiation of the post-arrival vulnerability assessment.³³ The pre-departure assessment is not a substitute but rather a complement to the post-arrival assessment.

Ensuring the availability of female staff to assist women returnee migrants is crucial. At a minimum, women should be offered the option to be assisted by female caseworkers. Provision of spaces that allow privacy and confidentiality is essential. This is considered best practice, as it helps create a comfortable and trusting environment, thereby enabling more accurate and adequate assessments with returnee migrants.

At a minimum, the centres receiving migrants should provide separate rooms for single women. Dedicated spaces for all women, including those with families, should also be considered, as well as full confidentiality and access to additional support services. Safe and inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities must be provided, which should include sex-segregated facilities, as well as facilities that are inclusive of the diversity of migrants, including migrants with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).³⁴ Safe spaces for women and girls, child friendly spaces including

33. A pre-departure assessment outlines the vulnerabilities and immediate support migrants need upon returning to their country of destination. It can prevent assessment fatigue and potential re-traumatization of returning migrants. Due consideration should be made to data protection and the right to privacy and confidentiality.

34. S. Hall and IOM, [Mapping and research to strengthen protection and assistance measures for migrants with diverse SOGIESC](#) (Geneva, IOM, 2023).

for breastfeeding for mothers and sex-segregated prayer areas should be incorporated in the design of these spaces.

Prioritizing a risk assessment at this stage is essential. Practitioners should provide information to returnee women, whether alone or part of a family unit, and identify any immediate risks that migrant women returnees may be exposed to upon return. They should also assess their capacity to respond to these risks. Practitioners should be equipped with contextual knowledge of the types of risks women experience in transit and areas of return, including risks specific to their status as migrant returnees. They should also be trained to apply people-centred and survivor-centred approaches to mitigate these risks.

An intersectional gender analysis, as described above, is necessary to understand the multiple and intersecting risks that migrant women can face. Establishing an understanding of immediate needs, early in the intervention process, can inform the development of comprehensive case management reintegration plans. These plans serve to guide both the returning migrant and case managers at the later stages of the reintegration process. Institutional rapid vulnerability assessments are valuable tools used in this process.³⁵

Establishing referral mechanisms at this stage of assistance is also critical. This includes identifying the services that women returnees may need immediately upon return, as these guide longer-term case management in reintegration assistance. At a minimum, practitioners should have a directory of services that provide women with access to safe shelter, food, health services including for sexual and reproductive health, mental health and psychosocial support, WASH facilities, protection and relocation services outside of the centres. Close collaboration

with protection focal points and protection agencies is essential. It is important that all interventions are trauma-informed and adhere to survivor-centred and rights-based approaches.

Practitioners and partners must be trained to respond sensitively to disclosures of gender-based violence and provide information on available services in the given context. This can be done through existing coordination mechanisms to ensure consistency in messaging, as well as through brochures, hotlines and official referrals to gender-based violence services accessible immediately upon return. Assistance design must also address potential barriers to access, ensuring that the services meet the needs of persons with disabilities, older-persons, persons with reduced literacy levels, speakers of different languages, and other considerations required to meet adequate standards to ensure equitable accessibility. Examples of adequate accommodation include sign language interpretation, easy-to-read materials and other small adjustments specific to individual. Information on resources should be provided at the first stages of the assistance and, where possible, should cover information on areas of return. Identifying accessible, survivor-centred support is fundamental to achieving safe, dignified and sustainable reintegration outcomes.

Returnee migrant women may be **victims of trafficking in persons**.³⁶ Staff should be trained to identify and assist anyone who discloses experiences of trafficking in persons and be familiar with existing guidelines on providing support to survivors.³⁷ Access to a national referral mechanism (or equivalent) must be available to ensure safe referrals and timely access to essential services. Data protection mechanisms and safeguards must be in place to uphold ethical standards when

35. IOM, *Reintegration Handbook: Practical guidance on the design, implementation and monitoring of reintegration assistance* (IOM, 2019).

36. Trafficking in persons means all recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of the position of vulnerability. For a full definition, please see IOM, *IOM Handbook on Protection and Assistance to Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse*; 25. (IOM, 2019)

37. IOM, *The IOM Handbook on Direct Assistance for Victims of Trafficking* (IOM, 2007). OSCE/ODIHR, *Guiding Principles on Human Rights in the Return of Trafficked Persons* (OSCE/ODIHR, 2014).

handling any confidential and sensitive information, and informed consent must always be obtained prior to referrals or the provision of assistance.³⁸

Practitioners working with returnee women should receive ongoing training on gender equality, diversity and inclusion; non-discrimination and human rights tailored to returnee migrants; psychological first aid and a psychosocially informed approach to return and reintegration counselling;³⁹ protection from sexual exploitation and abuse; gender-based violence safe disclosure handling and referrals. Capacity-building initiatives should cover linkages between gender and migration including risks of gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse, and trafficking in persons. This should be a minimum prerequisite for working in such functions, particularly roles providing direct assistance (for a list of training resources, see Annex 1). Managers of return and reintegration programmes should ensure adequate allocation of financial resources to enhance the capacity-building of practitioners and those who come into direct contact with migrant returnees.

Complaint, feedback and reporting mechanisms must be available and accessible to migrant women in their diversity, addressing intersectional barriers, at all stages of return and reintegration. Regular consultation with groups of migrant women in all their diversity is essential to better understand and address both the means of access and barriers to using accountability mechanisms. Levels of digital and non-digital literacy should be considered to help ensure meaningful participation. Age, disability, visual and hearing impairments, literacy and language barriers must also be addressed to ensure inclusive access. For instance, consulting with women with disabilities can ensure barriers are addressed such as accessibility of premises, accessibility of communications, and related cultural beliefs or biases that might lead to denial of service or any kind of discriminatory practices.

ASSESSMENTS FOR REINTEGRATION ASSISTANCE

This section outlines the assessment process necessary to initiate reintegration assistance and the establishment of counselling services for returning migrant women.

Practitioners should verify their understanding of the individual reintegration needs during assessments by confirming them with women being assessed and later through follow-up discussions. The chosen communication method should be guided by the migrant women's preferences (e.g. oral, written or electronic) to enhance efficiency, safety and confidentiality, and preserve dignity.

Assessing returnee women's access to family support and social networks is essential for managing risks and ensuring safe reintegration. Trained practitioners should engage women in discussions about potential challenges they may face upon return to their communities of origin. This can include family and community expectations, caregiving responsibilities and fear of stigmatization. Practitioners must be trained to address sensitive topics and support women to use the resources that are available to them to develop risk mitigation measures that contribute to their reintegration plan.

The assessment should include an evaluation of the migrant woman's economic situation, including the ability to independently access and manage income, savings and financial resources. It should also consider personal circumstances related to full-time or part-time employment, level of education and professional competencies (see 'Economic reintegration assistance' below). Moreover, it should account for gendered expectations and barriers to employment in certain sectors, as well as community or familial restrictions related to gender roles, decision-making and control over earnings, alongside risks of gender-based violence.

38. For guidance on referrals and reintegration assistance to victims of trafficking and informed consent, please see IOM, *Handbook on Protection and Assistance to Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse*, Chapter 3 (IOM, 2019).

39. IOM, *Reintegration Counselling: A Psychosocial Approach* (IOM, 2020).

It is important that these factors are considered to develop a realistic plan; however, case managers and workers should not reinforce gendered expectations and barriers in the reintegration context, as this may inadvertently limit migrant women's plans and aspirations. As in other areas, identifying both gender-specific and individual barriers – and applying mitigation measures – can start at this stage and continue throughout planning and implementation.

The availability of housing and safe shelters is a key consideration for returning migrant women. During the assessment, practitioners should evaluate the living conditions of the returnee migrants, considering contextual risks including risks of gender-based violence or other forms of exploitation or discrimination related to the type of shelter they will occupy. This includes assessing whether the shelter is temporary or long-term, rented or cohabitation with family members. Practitioners

should prepare mitigation strategies for shelter-related risks, either through their own services or by referring returnee women to specialized shelter providers.

Understanding each woman's strengths, risks, needs and priorities is essential to determining the type and level of assistance required for sustainable reintegration. Returning women with disabilities may face unique risks and needs. In some contexts, specialized services or additional social benefits for women with disabilities may not be available and basic services might not be accessible to them. There must be effective collaboration with different service providers, including private, public and non-profit providers (especially Organizations of Persons with Disabilities) so that services are inclusive of women with disabilities and/or chronic health conditions, ensuring that they are fully included throughout the reintegration process.



BOX 2**Conducting the first reintegration interview in a gender-responsive manner**

To ensure the first reintegration interview is safe, inclusive, dignified and gender-responsive, the following measures should be in place:

- Provide private, safe and confidential spaces for interviews.
- Returnee women should be provided with the option to be interviewed by a reintegration practitioner of the same sex.
- Where appropriate, women should be offered the choice to be interviewed individually and separately from their partners, in a way that does not raise concerns or create additional risks. This allows them to discuss specific needs and concerns openly, if they wish.
- Where safe, appropriate and voluntary, women should be offered the option to conduct sensitive discussions without the presence of their children. Where possible, arrange a separate space or provide childcare by competent authorities to ensure children are cared for and not exposed to potentially distressing information, while creating a safer environment for women to speak openly.
- Whenever possible, include a gender-based violence specialist within the team and ensure all staff are trained in gender-responsive and psychosocially informed interviewing techniques, particularly for high-risk groups and ensure that an updated referral pathway is available.
- Ensure that language and accessibility needs, including communication and physical access, are addressed.
- Make sure there is training and awareness-raising for staff to mitigate cultural beliefs, gender stereotypes or biases that may lead to discriminatory practices.



Case study: Alem, Ethiopia

Alem's early life in Ethiopia, was marked by hardship. But her story is a journey of resilience and empowerment. The untimely loss of Alem's mother necessitated her withdrawal from school at a young age. Seeking economic opportunity, she moved to Addis Ababa when she turned 15, working as a domestic worker. Driven by peer influence and the need to support her younger siblings, Alem embarked on an unsafe migration to Yemen, where she tragically became a victim of trafficking.

Upon her return to Ethiopia, Alem faced the daunting reality of rebuilding her life. Undeterred, she persevered, balancing domestic work during the day with pursuing her formal education in the evenings. A pivotal moment arrived when she encountered the Survivors Alliance during a night school session focused on safer migration. Inspired by their mission, Alem bravely shared her personal experience of trafficking, expressing a profound desire to contribute to their vital work.

Recognizing her inherent strength and potential, the Survivors Alliance connected Alem with Agar Ethiopia's Rehab Centre. There, she received comprehensive support, including crucial counselling services that facilitated her recovery from the trauma she had endured. Empowered by this support, Alem proactively engaged in basic computer literacy training while diligently continuing her formal education.

Today, Alem has achieved financial independence through employment at an internet café, allowing her to work during the day and pursue her studies at night. However, her journey extends far beyond personal success. Alem has emerged as a dedicated advocate, actively participating in awareness campaigns alongside fellow survivors. Her unwavering commitment to educating others about safer migration practices and providing support to those who have experienced similar hardships exemplifies her remarkable transformation from a trafficking survivor to a powerful beacon of hope and resilience within her community.

Note: Alem is a pseudonym.



CONDUCTING ASSESSMENTS WITH SURVIVORS OF GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE

During reintegration assessments, practitioners may encounter women who have been subjected to gender-based violence before, during and/or following their migration journey. Practitioners should not proactively seek to identify survivors of gender-based violence; instead, they should be trained on provision of support in cases where a migrant discloses experiences of, or concerns about gender-based violence. Such violence may take physical, emotional, psychological or economic forms. Perpetrators may be intimate partners, family members, community members, smugglers, traffickers or officials. They may also include personnel from organizations or other institutions, including, in some cases, the practitioner's own colleagues. Returnees should not be asked directly about their experiences of violence, as this may re-traumatize them and could put them at further risk when a threat persists. Where appropriate, practitioners should inform the individual about the availability of specialized services and, with their informed consent, agree on their preferred method of referral for assistance.

Practitioners should be aware of the range of specialized and intersectoral services available for survivors of gender-based violence using an updated service map and referral pathway. If a survivor discloses an experience of gender-based violence, the practitioner should listen without pressing for details, ensure confidentiality and provide information on available services. Even if no disclosure is made, practitioners should be prepared to share service options in a safe, respectful and survivor-centred manner, while carefully considering any associated risks.

Practitioners should be prepared to respond appropriately when disclosures involve allegations against a service provider or colleagues. In such cases, they must act in accordance with organizational protocols and ensure that survivors are not placed at further risk. All staff must be fully familiar with their organization's internal safeguarding measures or Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) protocols. Practitioners should inform survivors of any mandatory reporting obligations, particularly those required by law or internal procedures, prior to conducting any further assessment or intervention.

BOX 3

Essential services for survivors of gender-based violence

Migrant women, particularly those with insecure or irregular migration status, face an increased risk of gender-based violence, including upon return to their country of origin. Gender-based violence can have long-lasting physical, psychological and social impacts. Survivors may face stigma, shame, fear of not being believed and social exclusion, which lead to negatively impacting disclosure and access to support. Discussing experiences of gender-based violence can also trigger re-traumatization.

Essential services refer to a coordinated set of essential and quality multisectoral services for survivors of gender-based violence, including health, justice, police and social support aimed at reducing the impact of violence on survivors' well-being, facilitating recovery and empowerment, and preventing further violence. These services include access to immediate safe and secure accommodation and in some cases relocation support. To ensure a safe, survivor-centred and rights-based response, the following actions should guide reintegration support in line with the [*Essential Services Package for Women and Girls Subject to Violence*](#):

Gender-based violence core principles:

- **Human rights-based approach:** Ensure actions uphold international human rights standards.
- **Survivor-centred approach:** Place the rights, needs and desires of women and girls as the centre of focus of service delivery. Based on the guiding principles of safety, confidentiality, respect and non-discrimination, this requires consideration of the multiple needs of survivor, the various risks and vulnerabilities, the impact of decisions and actions taken, and ensures services are tailored to the unique requirements of each individual woman and girl.
- **Psychosocially informed approaches:** Integrate psychosocial and mental health into service delivery.
- **Gender-transformative approaches:** Work to address underlying gender inequalities that contribute to gender-based violence.
- **Context- and age-sensitive approach:** Provide services sensitive to survivors' unique backgrounds, characteristics and needs.
- **Accountability of perpetrators:** Ensure access to justice for survivors and promote accountability for violence.

Minimum actions for gender-responsive reintegration support:

- **Staff training:** All reintegration personnel should receive basic training on gender-based violence core principles, risk mitigation, safe disclosure handling, survivor-centred communication and referral procedures.
- **Apply data management and confidentiality:** Manage information related to gender-based confidentially, in line with survivors' consent and gender-based violence and protection principles.
- **Ensure safe interviewing conditions:** Ensure the design of interventions includes adequate spaces for interviews that respect gender-based violence core principles. Offer women the choice to be interviewed by female staff and separately from partners, family members or others.
- **Childcare provision:** Where appropriate, provide childcare for survivors' children to support the well-being of all families.
- **Service mapping and partnerships:** Maintain up-to-date referral pathways to specialized gender-based violence services, including shelters, legal aid, psychosocial support, health care, sexual and reproductive health services, and relevant law enforcement authorities for physical protection when needed.
- **Safe accommodation:** Ensure access to emergency safe accommodation or women's shelters with child friendly spaces as well as relocation services are adequately mapped. Where unavailable, identify confidential emergency housing to protect women from ongoing risk.

All actions must follow *do no harm* principles, uphold survivor autonomy and ensure that gender-based violence risk mitigation is integrated across reintegration assistance.

Case study: Seada, Ethiopia

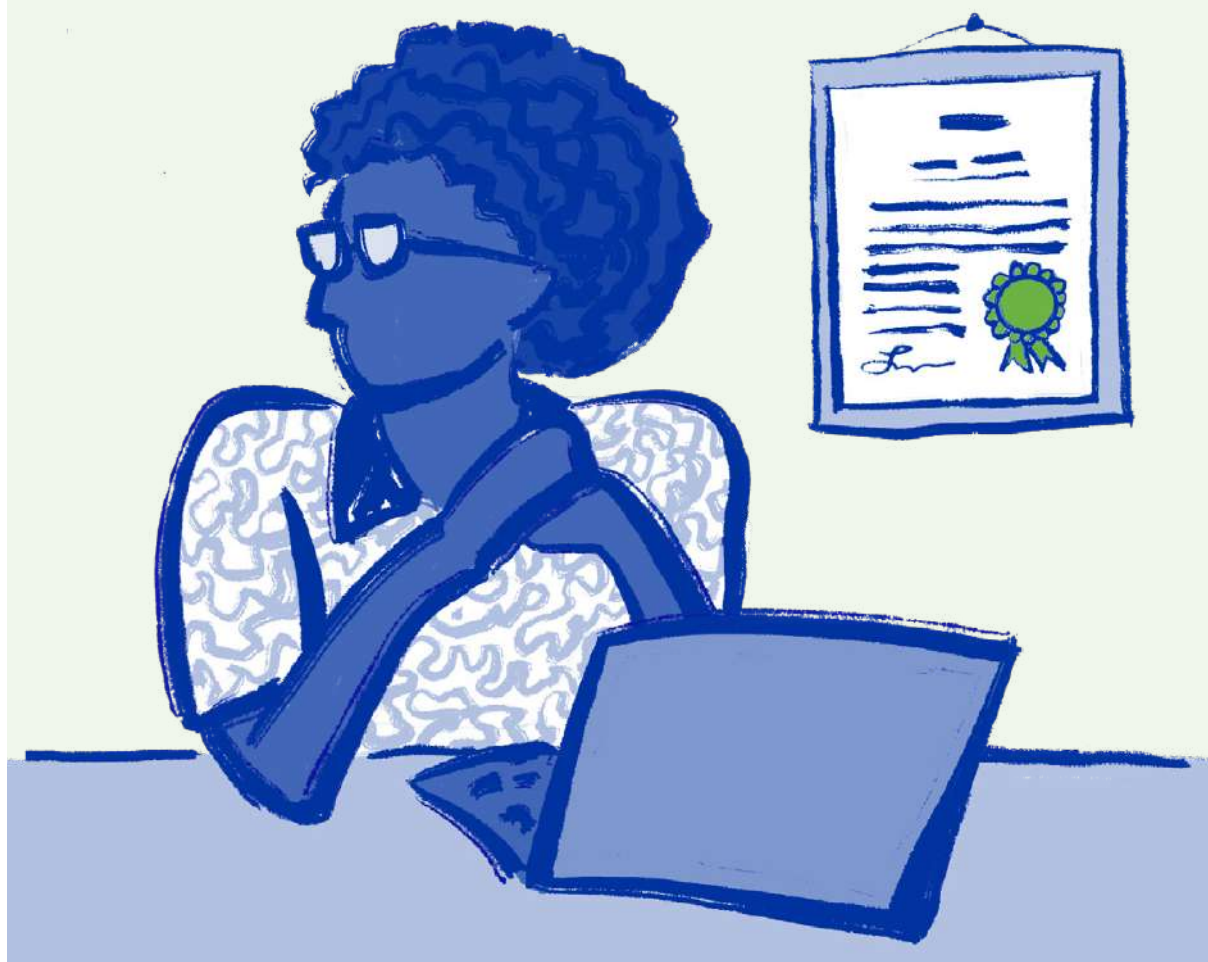
Seada, 30, from northern Ethiopia, grew up in poverty and supported herself and her siblings from a young age. In search of better opportunities, Seada migrated multiple times. She first migrated to Dubai for domestic work, where she endured more than 16-hour workdays without pay for 9 months. She then migrated to Saudi Arabia and the Sudan, enduring long hours, exploitation, abuse and dangerous travel.

On route to Khartoum, she travelled at night and hid in bushes during the day. She faced gender-based violence and abuse by traffickers and smugglers. After arriving in Khartoum, Saeda built a life for herself for more than a decade. She married, had three children and started a small snack and tea business.

In 2023, when war broke out in the Sudan, she fled back to Ethiopia with her family, arriving with no money or resources. The Good Samaritan Association provided counselling, psychosocial support and business skills training, along with start-up grant. With this support, Seada opened a retail shop and later expanded her business with an interest-free loan. Today, she earns a steady income and can support her children's education.

Seada's transformation has inspired other returnees. She encourages other women to avoid irregular migration and instead invest in small businesses at home.

Note: Seada is a pseudonym.



ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION ASSISTANCE

Gender can greatly shape economic reintegration, among other factors such as disability and age. When examining the barriers women experience when reintegrating, it is relevant to note that many women returnees typically have less access than men to employment opportunities and resources such as financial support and training.⁴⁰ Gender norms can significantly influence the types of jobs accessible to women, thereby constraining their economic options. Returnee women who were or are in situations of vulnerability encounter further obstacles in their economic reintegration,^{41,42} and are disproportionately impacted by debt,⁴³ while facing compounded barriers such as restricted access to financial services,⁴⁴ limited control over income and stigma associated with their occupation.

Moreover, young women, older women and women with disabilities face compounded challenges related to economic reintegration. Structural barriers such as discrimination, limited access to education and vocational training, and inaccessible workplaces or services restrict their participation in the labour market. Women with disabilities often encounter exclusion due to stigma and lack of reasonable accommodation, while older women may struggle with ageism and outdated skills. Young migrant and returnee women, meanwhile, face legal and social obstacles, including insecure status, interrupted education and limited networks in their host or home communities. These intersecting barriers reinforce cycles of dependency and economic vulnerability, underscoring the need for inclusive employment policy and tailored programmes.

To ensure that economic reintegration assistance effectively supports migrant women and incorporates a gender perspective, it is essential to recognize and address the specific barriers they face. Practitioners should ensure that they are aware of their own gender biases and do not provide guidance that reinforces gendered segregation of labour. To support this, practitioners should conduct a market assessment to identify available opportunities within a given context and align them with the needs, aspirations and circumstances of returnee women.

Support at the individual level may include **a) access to inclusive financial tools and business start-up services, b) inclusive job placement opportunities and c) inclusive training or educational support.** The sections below provide examples of how each of these areas can be approached from a gender perspective to ensure they are inclusive and responsive to returnee women's needs.



40. IOM, [Comparative Reintegration Outcomes between Forced and Voluntary Return and Through a Gender Perspective](#). Research Study #2 (IOM, 2021).

41. Ibid.

42. B.L. Nisrane, A. Morissens, A. Need and R. Torenvlied, "Economic Reintegration of Ethiopian Women Returned from the Middle East," *International Migration*, 55 (6): 122–36 (2017).

43. IOM and S. Hall, [Returning to Debt: Examining the Effects of Indebtedness on Reintegration Outcomes](#). Research Study #4 (IOM, December 2022).

44. Ibid.

GENDER-RESPONSIVE FINANCIAL TOOLS, SERVICES AND BUSINESS START-UP SUPPORT

Following case management and protection screenings (as described in previous sections), reintegration practitioners should be able to identify the vulnerabilities, care responsibilities, skills and financial status of returnee women. Based on this and always tailored to the individual cases, reintegration practitioners may discuss the diverse pathways in which returnee women could access financial tools, services and business start-up support. The following guidelines and steps are recommended:

- Map existing financial products accessible to women, including microloans, microcredits, remittance products and mobile banking solutions, which are particularly beneficial for women in rural areas.
 - ➔ Consider that some returnee migrant women may require specific financial products due to limitations with legal documentation or in some contexts may need to have a male family member approve their access.
 - ➔ Assess women's financial ownership and their ability to access savings accumulated during migration.
- Provide start-up grants, which may include non-repayable seed capital in addition to microloans.
 - ➔ Design grants that support diverse livelihood pathways for women.
- Ensure that assessments address overlapping social factors which may increase vulnerability and exclusion, such as returnee women who are heads of households, survivors of gender-based violence or women with disabilities.
- Partner with women-led cooperatives and businesses, providing seed funding and group mentorship that connects returnees with local women entrepreneurs whenever possible.

JOB PLACEMENT WITH A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Livelihood support should be integrated into a holistic reintegration programme that supports returnee women's meaningful access to sustainable economic opportunities.⁴⁵ Supporting women with targeted job placement services can help overcome gender biases in the labour market, enabling them to apply existing skills, acquire new ones and enhance the overall sustainability of their reintegration.⁴⁶ The following guidelines and steps are recommended:

- Identify job placement opportunities that have undergone due diligence or monitoring to ensure they are free from exploitation, particularly for women returnees. Use the approved options as a basis for their employment and provide career counselling that addresses restrictive gender norms – ensuring that options are not limited by traditional gender roles and that women are supported in making informed choices based on their individual preferences.
- Collaborate with local employers to reduce employment barriers for women by:
 - ➔ Highlighting diverse or informal qualifications without viewing them as barriers.
 - ➔ Identify opportunities that provide childcare support and flexible working conditions.
- Assess and support returnee women's literacy (including digital literacy if needed in the workplace) and education to provide tailored advice on entering or re-entering the job market, including support to formally recognize potential skills gained during their migration by relevant entities.

45. Ibid.

46. UN Women, *Gender and Reintegration of Overseas Filipino Workers* (New York, UN Women, 2022).

- Encourage the establishment of networks and peer support programmes that connect returnee women with others who have similar experiences.

ACCESS TO INCLUSIVE TRAINING AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES

Inclusive training and educational programmes facilitate the sustainable reintegration of women returnees by providing or enhancing skills that are in demand at the local level. Moreover, these programmes can cultivate women's support networks, strengthen community-level reintegration and contribute to informed migration decision-making. The following guidelines and steps are recommended:

- Recognize transferable skills from women's migration experiences and, where possible, support the certification of skills obtained prior to or during migration.
- Provide business and financial literacy training that is culturally appropriate and specifically designed for women, taking into account that traditional gender roles may discourage or exclude women from these opportunities.
- Implement flexible scheduling options to accommodate women's caregiving responsibilities.
- Ensure the availability of safe and accessible locations and provide childcare support to eliminate barriers to participation.
- Promote women-led trainings and women-only groups whenever feasible to foster a supportive learning environment.



SOCIAL REINTEGRATION ASSISTANCE

As with other dimensions of reintegration, women's access to social reintegration is shaped by gender norms, stigma and policy gaps. It often intersects with pre-existing exclusion and discrimination. Returnee women may face limited access to safe and affordable housing, often relying on male family members or partners for shelter, which can increase their exposure to violence and exploitation. Many face systemic barriers to obtaining or recovering legal identity documents, limiting their autonomy and ability to access essential services.⁴⁷ Social protection programmes can exclude women if they are tied to the "head of household", typically assumed to be a man, and require documentation that returnee women may lack. Systemic inequalities are compounded by limited access to justice, particularly for survivors of gender-based violence or trafficking in persons, and by barriers to health care – including overburdened caregiving roles and poor access to sexual and reproductive health services. Addressing these challenges requires a gender-responsive and rights-based approach to social reintegration.

Moreover, women with disabilities, older women and young women who are migrants or returnees face unique challenges in social reintegration. Upon return, many encounter stigma and discrimination tied to gender, age or disability, which can hinder their acceptance and participation in community life. Women with disabilities often struggle with inaccessible services and social exclusion, while they and older women may experience isolation, loss of social roles and limited access to support networks. All groups are subject to the failure to meet family, cultural and social expectations. These factors can erode confidence and social cohesion, highlighting the need for gender- and

disability-responsive reintegration programmes that promote inclusion, community awareness and equitable access to services and opportunities.

To ensure that social reintegration assistance effectively supports migrant women and incorporates a gender perspective, recognizing and addressing the specific barriers they face, tailored support should respond to the distinct needs and risks faced by returnee women in accessing: a) safe housing and accommodation, b) legal identity and documentation, c) social protection programmes, d) legal aid and justice, and e) health and well-being services. The sections below outline how each of these areas can be approached from a gender perspective to ensure they are inclusive, equitable and responsive to returnee women's needs.



47. IOM, *Reintegration Handbook: Practical guidance on the design, implementation and monitoring of reintegration assistance* (Geneva, IOM, 2019).

Case study: Sandra Flores, El Salvador

Sandra Flores migrated to the United States with her two children, hoping for a better life. She imagined opportunity and stability – but her migration journey proved far more difficult than expected. “When you leave, you think it’s a dream – something wonderful,” she reported. “But it’s quite the opposite of what you’re told. Unfortunately, we have to experience it first-hand to believe it.”

After returning to El Salvador, Sandra and her children faced uncertainty. But she chose to rebuild, explaining, “We said, ‘We have to keep fighting. We have to move forward.’”

Sandra joined a reintegration project supported by IOM. It began with psychosocial support, helping her process the emotional toll of the difficult experiences she had during her migration journey and assess her entrepreneurial potential.

“One of the most important things for me is that they taught me how to manage a business,” she said. With seed capital, Sandra launched a food business. Her son Luis joined the training, eager to help. He now manages marketing and aims to study graphic design.

Sandra employs other women – many single mothers – and supports their growth. “The women who work with me have been fighting with needs like mine. I’ve always said we have to support each other,” she reported.

Today, Sandra is a confident business owner and community leader, saying, “I see life differently now – stronger than ever. I don’t give up, and I’m grateful for everything I’ve achieved.”

Luis, Sandra’s son, testified, “I feel very proud of my mom. She’s a strong, fighting woman. There’s no need to go somewhere else – if you try hard enough, you can overcome anything.”

Note: Sandra and Luis are pseudonyms.

A GENDER-RESPONSIVE APPROACH TO SAFE HOUSING AND ACCOMMODATION

Caseworkers and managers should be equipped to identify gender-specific challenges and support women in making informed, voluntary, safe and appropriate housing choices. The following guidelines are recommended:

- Assess possible intersectional barriers when evaluating housing and accommodation options, such as gender-based discrimination, exclusion from public services and physical accessibility, as well as the conditions of the available options.
- Ensure safe and gender-responsive temporary housing as needed:
 - ➔ Special attention should be given to women in vulnerable situations, including survivors of trafficking and gender-based violence, to ensure they are referred to the appropriate specialized services, including relevant shelters.
 - ➔ Considerations should be made for women with disabilities and older women with limited mobility or cognition, as they may require special accommodation and potential accompaniment services.
- Maintain a directory of long-term housing and shelter options that are inclusive of accommodation for women returnees.

➔ Housing options should be assessed for safety, accessibility and proximity to essential services that guarantee the protection of returnee women.

- Listen to the returnee women's concerns and identify, where possible, alternative options for those who do not want to return to their previous place of residence or family.
- Work closely with shelters for women to promote collaborative and proactive working relationships.

A GENDER LENS FOR LEGAL IDENTITY AND DOCUMENTATION

Ensuring that legal identity and documentation are integrated into reintegration plans is critical for a sustainable and rights-based support. A gender-responsive approach should consider the unique barriers women may face in obtaining documentation for themselves and their children, including legal, cultural and logistical challenges. The following guidelines are recommended:

- Identify contexts where women may depend on male relatives to obtain documentation and provide support to overcome this barrier.
- Ensure registration services are accessible for women, especially for those with limited mobility.
- Mobile and community-based registration services could be an option.
- Establish safe referral pathways for survivors of gender-based violence and trafficking in persons to access their legal identity.
- Provide legal counselling to inform women about their rights and support them in navigating administrative procedures.

GENDER-RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMES

Inclusive social protection programmes are essential for the sustainable reintegration of returnee women. The following guidelines are recommended:

- Ensure that social protection programmes allow women to register in their own name, granting them direct access to entitlements and benefits.
- Simplify administrative processes, by offering flexible documentation⁴⁸ to reduce barriers for women, particularly those without the required formal identifications.
- Provide specialized programmes for female-headed households, pregnant and lactating mothers recognizing their disproportionate economic insecurity. Ensure support or credit is available during and after pregnancy.
- Develop outreach and public information campaigns tailored to women. These should emphasize the portability of benefits and accessibility of services, including maternity, childcare and older persons' support services,⁴⁹ accounting for the unequal care burden placed on women by traditional gender roles.
- Ensure outreach and, where feasible, mobile reintegration services in rural areas to improve access for women with limited mobility or connectivity.
 - ➔ Involve local women's groups and networks to help raise awareness, reduce stigma, and promote inclusion and social cohesion.
- Work with child social protection programmes that recognize women's unpaid care work as a structural barrier to their economic opportunities and that ensure adequate support is provided.

48. UN Women, [Leaving No-one Behind: Access to Social Protection for All Migrant Women](#). Policy Brief No. 14 (New York, UN Women, 2020).

49. Ibid.

Case study: Jagoda – receiving reintegration support in Serbia

Jagoda migrated from Serbia to Slovakia after accepting a job offer she found on Facebook. Everything seemed in order, including the documentation, but the opportunity turned out to be a scam. With no money and no time to prepare other plans, she had to return to Serbia abruptly and under distressing circumstances.

Upon her return, Jagoda received reintegration support from IOM Serbia, focusing on housing and health-related needs. Rebuilding trust was essential. She was connected to someone who could guide her through the reintegration process and reassure her that she wasn't alone.

Her reintegration was approached holistically. Immediate needs were addressed, and she was linked to available services. Coordination with local institutions and partners ensured that support was comprehensive and tailored to her situation. She gained access to health services, social protection and opportunities to enter the job market – steps that helped her move towards economic independence and social stability. Monitoring her progress was key to ensuring the support was effective.

Today, Jagoda has settled and is rebuilding her life again.

Note: Jagoda is a pseudonym.



A GENDER-RESPONSIVE APPROACH TO LEGAL AID AND JUSTICE:

Access to legal aid and justice is essential for sustainable, rights-based reintegration of migrant women returnees given their risk of rights violations throughout stages of migration. Gender inequalities in laws, their implementation and access to justice can limit women's ability to claim and exercise their rights.⁵⁰ Migrant women face structural inequalities compounded by intersecting forms of discrimination linked to gender, migration status and other characteristics.⁵¹ Migrant women returnees may face barriers to accessing legal aid, justice, and remedies. These include lack of information on rights and entitlements, fear of retaliation, bias, financial and logistical needs to obtaining documents, travel costs, and a lack of connections when witnesses are needed for legal proceedings or identity documents. These factors can impact their trust in authorities and service providers and prevent them from seeking legal aid, representation, or documentation.⁵² Barriers may be particularly significant for survivors of gender-based violence and trafficking in persons. For service providers and practitioners supporting migrant women returnees, the following guidelines are recommended, recognizing the roles of partner organizations and primary duty bearers:

- Prioritize women's safety and protection from further harm when providing support and facilitating referrals by mapping gender-responsive legal aid services.⁵³
- Provide migrant women returnees with clear and accessible information on women's rights and available legal aid, protection and justice services, and support women to make informed decisions about whether and how to use these services and map any associated risks with mitigation measures.
- Identify barriers to accessing justice and legal assistance and, with the woman's informed consent, support provision of accurate information and referrals to relevant services. Consider barriers related to migration status, language, disability, cost, mobility, documentation and fear of authorities.
- Support women to access services that are accessible and responsive to their needs, including through interpretation, accessible communication, safe and private spaces.
- Ensure that referrals are safe and confidential, particularly for survivors of gender-based violence and trafficking in persons, and help women access legal aid, protection, police, health and other essential services as needed. Where possible, minimize the number of services women must navigate and the need to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences.
- Respect women's dignity, choices and confidentiality, and provide support in a gender-responsive and survivor-centered manner that avoids discrimination, harmful stereotypes and further harm.
- Identify and address risks of further violence, retaliation or other harm when women seek justice or protection, and ensure that referrals and support do not increase these risks.

50. UN Women, "[What justice means to women – and how to deliver it](#)" (New York, UN Women, 4 March 2026).

51. IOM, [Access to Justice: A Migrants' Right](#) (Geneva, IOM, June 2019).

52. UN Women, "[Case open: Justice for all women and girls](#)" (New York, UN Women, 26 February 2026). IOM, [Reintegration Handbook](#) (Geneva, IOM, 2019). IOM, [Handbook on Protection and Assistance for Migrants Vulnerable to Violence Exploitation and Abuse](#) (Geneva, IOM, 2019).

53. IOM, [Access to Justice: A Migrants' Right](#) (Geneva, IOM, June 2019).

GENDER-RESPONSIVE HEALTH CARE AND WELL-BEING

Ensuring returnee women can access comprehensive, gender-responsive health care is crucial for their well-being and sustainable reintegration. The following guidelines are recommended:

- Conduct a gender-responsive and inclusive assessment of barriers to health-care access – such as lack of childcare, difficulties with documentation or medical records, financial constraints and transportation issues – and provide tailored support.
- Maintain a directory of gender-responsive, culturally appropriate, inclusive and psychosocially informed health providers.
 - Prioritize clinics that and practitioners who offer discrimination- and stigma-free care that respects women's autonomy and actively supports their informed decision-making, and who do not discriminate on the basis of other social factors such as age, disability and ethnic and religious background.
 - Include specific lists of providers who address the needs of survivors of gender-based violence, trafficking in persons, and migrants in situations of vulnerability, utilizing the survivor-centred approach.
- Develop innovative and flexible health-care delivery models where physical access to health care is limited.
 - Develop partnerships with community health-care providers, mobile clinics and telehealth platforms that can bring services closer to returnee women.
- Leverage community-based care networks.
 - Integrate informal support systems and trusted community health providers into reintegration plans.
- Ensure sexual and reproductive health services are accessible for women in all their diversity, including testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, contraception, family planning, antenatal and postnatal care, among others.
- Ensure continuity of health-care services upon migrants' return.
 - Special attention should be given to transgender, non-binary and intersex persons, particularly in ensuring seamless access to ongoing treatments such as hormonal therapy.



PSYCHOSOCIAL REINTEGRATION ASSISTANCE

Psychosocial reintegration refers to the support provided to returning migrants to help them re-establish their lives meaningfully within their communities, whether returning to their place of origin, relocating within their country or in a third country of residence. It takes into account their psychological challenges and strengths, social capital and capacity for socialization; the barriers to these factors; and the surrounding cultural context. A gender-responsive and context-specific approach is essential to promote sustainable reintegration outcomes.

Practitioners must adopt psychosocially informed, culturally sensitive practices. **Individual psychosocial assessments** should consider each woman's migration history, reasons for return, emotional state, social support networks and access to services, including health care, legal aid and livelihoods. Mental health responses must be tailored, accounting for vulnerabilities and specific risks faced by women in all their diversity. Pre-return and reintegration counsellors should be trained in using a psychosocial approach in counselling sessions, using the dedicated training and guidance tools.⁵⁴

Gender-based violence survivors should receive comprehensive, survivor-centred support, including psychological first aid if needed, psychological counselling, medical treatment and referrals to appropriate services. It is vital that mental health consultations take place in safe, confidential, non-discriminatory and secure environments, while being accessible without excessive travel or cost. Subsidizing consultation fees and necessary medication helps reduce barriers to care.⁵⁵ Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) service providers must be trained in gender-responsive

and inclusive practices, and should apply survivor-centred principles and make referrals to gender-based violence specialist services. This includes emphasizing that reintegration caseworkers and MHPSS service providers should not be providing or encouraging family mediation services under any circumstances.

Where national mental health services are insufficient or underfunded, establishing peer support groups for returnee women can help reduce feelings of isolation. These groups do not replace professional care yet they can offer community-led support and safe spaces for returnee women to share their experiences and rebuild their confidence. Sessions should be held at accessible times and locations, with respect for confidentiality and women's caregiving responsibilities. They should be facilitated by a psychologist, counsellor or trained and supervised volunteer, especially when they include or are specifically targeted at gender-based violence survivors and victims of trafficking, which would require enhanced safeguards in terms of safety, confidentiality, the principle of 'do no harm' and emotional regulation. These groups should consciously seek to create safe and dignified spaces, which promote inclusive and respectful discussions that address unequal and exclusionary power dynamics. To create more inclusive spaces, different peer groups could be established based on age cohorts, marital status, disability, ethnicity and religion. Peer support groups that bring together returnee and community caregivers can also offer a space for sharing experiences and mutual support.

Provision of focused and specialized services should include:

54. IOM, [Reintegration Counselling: A Psychosocial Approach](#) (IOM, 2020); IOM, [A Psychosocial Approach to Reintegration Counselling](#) (IOM, 2020).

55. GBV Responders. [Healthcare for GBV Survivors](#).

- Individual and group counselling tailored to returnee women's needs.
- Family-based counselling, where appropriate, to support reintegration.
- Access to physical and mental health assessments.
- Freedom for women to choose the gender of service providers, interpreters and others involved.
- Safe provision of emergency reproductive health services, including post-exposure prophylaxis and emergency contraception.

In areas with limited infrastructure, services should be adapted to ensure remote support, including mobile units, hotlines or digital platforms. Efforts should also strengthen the capacity of local actors through technical training and continuous coordination.

MHPSS services can be integrated in other services that may be perceived by the women as more urgent or essential for their reintegration, such as livelihood support, using relevant tools.⁵⁶

Strong referral systems are vital, particularly when reintegration centres operate on a short-term basis. Mapping available services, such as mental health-care providers, emotional counselling services, gender-based violence services, community workers and shelters can help build robust response networks. Partnerships with women-led organizations and local authorities should be prioritized, and referrals should be tracked to ensure follow-up and continuity of care.

Reintegration must also extend to rebuilding a social life. Activities should foster trust and community cohesion, especially where cultural norms or stigma may prevent women from engaging with services immediately. Peer support, community-based psychosocial activities and awareness-raising campaigns can help break stigma around mental health issues and gender-based violence to lead to safe discussions.

Reintegration services must be inclusive of the diverse needs of women across different backgrounds, including different ethnicities, social status, linguistic, physical and intellectual capacities and should accommodate persons with diverse SOGIESC. Services must ensure that the safety and dignity of individuals are practically addressed at all levels of support and that the support is non-discriminatory.

CASE MANAGEMENT AND CLOSURE

It is essential that practitioners adapt a person-centred and gender-responsive approach throughout the duration of the case management process, including during case closure.

There are various reasons why a reintegration case may come to a close. These include the individual's transfer to specialized services, the conclusion of the assistance, challenges in maintaining contact or, in some cases, the individual's decision to withdraw from assistance. Closure can also be due to the death of the individual.

When returnees express a desire to discontinue assistance, caseworkers should engage in a respectful and confidential discussion to understand the reasons and assess whether adjustments to the support could better meet the woman's needs. Caseworkers must remain sensitive to practical and sociocultural factors that may influence a woman returnee's decision to withdraw from services. Barriers such as transportation costs, inconvenient timing of sessions, lack of accessibility to services or the gender of the caseworker should be proactively identified and addressed.

Changes in the individual's personal circumstances, including remigration, new responsibilities or external pressures, must be treated as valid and respected, with regular check-ins to ensure that services remain relevant, appropriate and responsive to changing circumstances.

56. IOM, *MHPSS and Livelihood Integration (MLI) Manual* (IOM, 2022).

Case closure must be conducted in a phased and transparent manner, never abrupt. A clear communication strategy should be in place, allowing for the gradual withdrawal of services or timely referrals to other actors for continued support. In cases where assistance is dependent on time-limited funding, caseworkers should ensure transparency to manage expectations and preserve trust in service providers.

Caseworkers play a critical role in supporting individuals to build or rebuild the capacity, confidence and resources necessary to manage their own lives with dignity, autonomy and resilience. In fulfilling this role, caseworkers are also reminded of the importance of maintaining their own well-being through regular self-care, recognizing that the sustainability and quality of their support is influenced by their own mental, emotional and physical well-being.

Case study: Merim Ismael, Ethiopia

Merim Ismael, 37, grew up in poverty after her mother left the family. She was raised by her grandfather and left school in 8th grade to help support her family through domestic work and handicrafts.

At age 17, Merim migrated to Saudi Arabia via a broker. An agency placed her in a private household where she was exploited, abused and denied proper wages. The harsh conditions left her increasingly ill. After three years, she returned to Ethiopia without the resources to start a business or secure stable employment.

Merim later migrated to the Sudan, where she married, had two children and gained an income by selling tea and snacks. After five years, she returned to Ethiopia but could not find employment, so she migrated again to Saudi Arabia. In 2023, following new government restrictions, she was forced to return to Ethiopia amidst conflict, finding her grandmother deceased and her children living on the street.

Referred to the Good Samaritan Association, Merim received psychosocial support and business skills training. With a start-up grant, she opened a fried potato chips business and also sells sugar, coffee and other consumer items. Today, she earns a steady income, saves daily and is able to provide for her children's education.

Note: Merim is a pseudonym.



Case study: Integrating MHPSS into Reintegration Support for Returning Migrant Women

Through the provision of technical support on reintegration to the Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU), IOM Viet Nam identified two key gaps:

- The absence of integrated counselling and referral services.
- Limited coordination among government agencies.

To address these issues, One-Stop Service Offices (OSSOs) were established to address the psychological and health needs, employment and legal challenges, and vocational training needs of returnee migrant women.

To improve service delivery, the agency revised the modality of vocational training and integrated mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into the support package, through the following activities:

- Development of a situational analysis report surveying returnee women in five provinces to better understand their experiences, challenges and needs, and propose informed and targeted interventions.
- Delivery of free and tailored services, positioning OSSOs as a model of bottom-up innovation. They offered a wide range of counselling, information and referral services.
- Provision of counselling sessions via phone and social media platforms. In-person counselling and home visits were also conducted to ensure women in hard-to-reach locations were included in the assistance.
- Development of two distinct communication channels: an offline network leveraging VWU's grassroots presence and an online platform via Facebook to reach migrant women through digital means.
- Extension of OSSO services to include support for the children of returnee women, addressing legal status issues and improving access to education and health care.

In addition to MHPSS-related interventions, complementary activities were organized including training-of-trainers, capacity-building for government officials and the development of comprehensive standard operating procedures and technical guidelines and manuals.

A bilateral workshop with the Republic of Korea (one of the main destination countries) led to the establishment of a cross-border referral network. Periodic reports, statistical updates and evaluations were conducted to monitor progress and assess impact.

The agency continues to collaborate closely with partners involved in migrant reintegration and maintains a robust referral system to ensure migrant women access the full range of available support services.

ANNEX 1: ONLINE COURSES

The following courses are on the IOM Migrant Protection Platform:

- [IOM Reintegration Handbook Online Course](#)
- [Protection and Assistance for Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse](#)
- [Psychosocial Support for Migrants](#)
- [Community-Based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergencies and Displacement](#)
- [Counter Trafficking Essential Training](#)

The following courses are on the IOM Migration E-Campus:

- Module 16: Gender Equality and Migration [IKG16GEM-EN-IOM-2024](#)
- I Know Gender 1-2-3: Gender Concepts to get Started; International Frameworks for Gender Equality; and Promoting Gender Equality throughout the UN System [IKG123-EN-IOM-2024](#)
- Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) and Migration. [SOGIESC-EN-IOM-2022](#)

Access to these courses requires first [logging in to the E-Campus](#).



IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

UN Women exists to advance women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead United Nations entity on gender equality and secretariat of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, we shift laws, institutions, social norms and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. Our partnerships with governments, women's movements and the private sector, coupled with our coordination of the broader United Nations, deliver lasting changes. We make strides in four areas: leadership, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and peace, security and humanitarian action. UN Women keeps the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.



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