

UPFRONT

'Our battles with depression, stigmatization after return from Libya'

- Migrants return with missing wombs, hepatitis, others
- Returnee relives how Libyan policemen arrested, raped her inside car
- Our support plans for deportees, others —FG

For many stranded Nigerian migrants evacuated from Libya, the joy of safely returning home after near-death experiences is short-lived. Many of them are suffering from depression occasioned by the daunting challenges they are facing on returning to the country. Some who were assisted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) to return home have had the privilege of getting psycho-social support and empowerment that pulled them out of their predicament while the fate of many others who were deported or chose to return on their own but without access to such support remains uncertain, INNOCENT DURU reports.

SIKO returned to Nigeria after a horrific experience spanning almost three years in Libya. It was a celebration of sort to have returned home alive for the young lady who had seen a number of her peers dead or gruesomely killed in the course of the journey.

But the joy of a safe return to fatherland was soon eclipsed by the stark reality of the myriad of challenges on ground compounded by disturbing remarks from friends and acquaintances. That, she said, paved the way for depression.

"When I came back, I rested for one or two weeks, after which I started contacting friends for a job. Three months after, I was back into my shell. Everybody who sought to know where I had been was shocked that I embarked on such a journey. They felt I am too knowledgeable to have fallen for it.

"That, first of all, kept me indoors. I stayed at home for six months without going out. I started remembering what I passed through in the house where I worked, the things I had lost, searching for people who till today I can't still find or get their contacts.

"I started thinking of the business that I left behind. A friend of my said it was at the point that I was supposed to have been reckoned with that I travelled. She said I wouldn't compare where I would have been now with what I was if I hadn't travelled.

"All this started eating deep into me and I couldn't measure up even in my family.

Having returned to the country with little or nothing to fall back on, Siko said: "My younger siblings had to be the ones supporting me for a very long period. The days I knew they didn't have and couldn't give were really depressing.

"It was worse because my daughter was with my mum while I was away, and coming back, I resumed my responsibility immediately.

"Sometimes, I had to beacon on lots of people for assistance, and sometimes when they turned me down, I felt bad. I can't count how many times I had to drink gari (cassava flakes) once in a whole day. I had to beg friends to make sure my daughter was okay.

"It got really bad that I had to call my daughter's dad and ask if really I was going to be taking care of our daughter alone or that I would be part of the child's life.

He responded that in their own culture, they don't train their children outside."

Reflecting on life in Libya, she added: "I used to drink. They will teach you to drink if you don't know how to. Our burger would give you one plastic of dry raw gin.

"She knew that we used to throw it away, so she started making us to drink it in her presence. She would make you gulp the drink half way before she would allow you to go.

"After a while, I started crying day in day out. I would be the last person to sleep and the first to wake. Sometimes I would not be able to sleep until I took gin. I got used to drinking over there and started smoking little by little.

"Coming back home, my family at a point began to think that I was becoming lazy probably because they welcomed me when I came back. Along the line, all the support I was getting from them stopped and I had to make my daughter go to her dad's mother, which was something I never wanted.

"The depression became really bad after I allowed my daughter to go and stay with her father's mom. People made me to realise that a man who had rejected a child before she was born would take advantage of her now that I beamed on him to take care of her.

"I was angry for allowing myself go through the experiences. I was angry with so many things and drinking became my routine. I wouldn't eat for a whole day but I kept drinking. It got so bad.

"I had a couple of friends who each time they saw me, the best they could do was to offer me drink or smoke. It became like a routine. I was actually doing that because I wanted to forget all the ugly experiences. But the sad story is that you can never forget them."

Siko recalled that during her time in Libya, she had some near-death experiences.

She said: "While in Libya, I had near death experiences twice. When I left the 'Connection House' where I was staying, I probably would have died, because 12 days after I left, there was bombing at the place and a lot of girls died. A couple of girls also died in the house where we were staying.

"There was a particular one that I was the one always carrying, feeding and treating her. Two of the girls then were flown back to Nigeria, and on returning, they died. It was a very sad story for me."

For a long time after she returned to Nigeria, Chizzy, another returnee, battled with stigmatization; a situation that compounded her heart-rending Libya experience.

She said: "I suffered trauma and depression when I came back because I didn't expect what I experienced during the journey. We came back empty handed and there was stigmatization, discrimination and there was no hope for one to give back to the family.

"Many of my peers came back without their wombs and with different diseases, unwanted pregnancies and Hepatitis B, among others. I came in contact with IOM after I was sold from a

prostitution house to another state. I went to the embassy voluntarily to say that I wanted to come back home.

"The embassy called to tell me that my TC was ready. I was on my way there when the police caught me, collected my passport and raped me inside a car. From there, I was resold. When I escaped, I went back to the embassy where I spent three weeks before the Federal Government sent a flight to bring us back home.

"It was after a year that IOM contacted me for business training. I also went through psycho-social support. When I came back, I could not talk to anyone. But right now I can face a crowd to share my experience.

"It was when IOM gave life back to me and reintegrated me that I thought of what I could give back to my community. It was then that I started talking on radio stations about irregular migration and human trafficking."



But it was a different story when I got to Libya. I was promised two weeks to get to Europe, but I ended up spending one and a half years in Libya and never had a glimpse of Italy

More returnees relive battles with depression

The challenge of giving in to depression among returnees is not peculiar to the female folk. Sammy, a male returnee, also had a running battle with depression. Like Siko, he also took to alcohol in the hope of getting rid of his headache by so doing.

Sammy said: "I came back in December 2017. In December last year, I took some migrants as messengers to my area and showed them where I used to drink every day because I was always thinking.

"A trainer, Osita Osemene, asked me to keep sharing experience, and when I started doing that, I started feeling some relief. The more I shared my story, the more I feel like I am saving the souls of many people.

"I later got a job in 2018. But before then, I got an opportunity to be part of the first phase of migrants as messengers.

"IOM empowered us in 2019. We are three in a group: two females and I. We have been doing the business since then. We are into sales of soft drinks. The challenge is that we don't have enough supply to meet our demands."

Psycho-social support, Sammy said, is very necessary for every returnee, especially those who were incarcerated or kidnapped.

"I believe that psycho-social support should come before re-integration," he said. "If not for Mr Osita who counselled me, I probably would not do well in my business or life again. But it has to be voluntary. The family should also give support to returnees."

It was also not a palatable experience for Tito after she returned to the country.

She said: "I went through trauma and depression when I came back because it was not easy to cope. The fact that I always felt like I had failed in my academics didn't help. All the experience I had on my journey compounded my plight. It was really traumatic.

"For some months, I wasn't myself. I became hostile to people and didn't trust anyone anymore. It was when I joined IOM and became part of the migrants as messengers that things started coming back to shape because of the several training I attended and the people that I started meeting. I was also empowered by IOM."

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• Irregular migrants boarding a van in Niger

'Our battles with depression, stigmatization after return from Libya'

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'How we were trafficked to Libya'

The returnees' experiences revealed that traffickers and/or their agents are not spirits but regular people that victims deal with on a regular basis. Some of the survivors said they were trafficked by cousins, family friends, friends, among others.

"Going to Libya, for me, came through a friend," Siko said.

"I was into event management and every weekend, there was always an event to attend to. The friend that introduced me to the travel agent and I used to make ice blocks and cubes together.

"After telling the guy all I could do, the guy said I was such a talent that one could invest in. He later introduced the travelling idea to me, saying that I would need advanced knowledge for the kind of job that I do.

"He said after sharpening my skills abroad, I would come back and establish properly. He actually told me that a part of the journey would be by road because of immigration officers while the other would be by air.

For a couple of weeks, Siko kept ruminating over the offer.

She said: "I was very skeptical about it because he said I should not tell anyone about it. We were supposed to be five but in the dying minutes, the other four backed out because, according to them, they could not get money to give to the guy."

Eventually, she said, "I went on with the plan because I had too many underlining issues family wise and educationally. I was bringing up my daughter, a four year-old, alone, and it was demanding for me.

"Family wise, I was going through a lot. My family wasn't settled, my parents were separated and all that. I just thought it was an opportunity to be away from all the troubles here. In spite of the things that I should have questioned, fears of the things that I was facing made me give it a try.

"The guy told me I would have paid back within six months and start working for my own money. The possibility of going back to a catering school where I could learn a culinary course and use that to better my life and come back to use it to work somewhere also made me to give it a trial. I felt I should give it a year, but one year ended up becoming three years."

She added: "From half the route, I already knew the journey was a death sentence. It was entirely different from what they said. Two people died in the course of the journey. One had a leg injury and was limping.

"The Hilux (van) conveying us got spoilt around a place that was very cold. It was immediately after we passed the place where the stars looked very close that you would almost be touching them the way you touch the ceiling of your house.

"The cold in that area was so much that we were exhaling vapour. We had to move into a place like a grave covered with sand with space in between. A driver of

another Hilux van gave us firewood and stones to make fire, but it didn't last for too long. We had to sleep there.

"But when we started waking ourselves up the following day, the man didn't wake up. We had to leave his remains there as the driver was already beaoning.

"When we got to Trauna, one of the girls was found to be missing. One of the ladies explained that she slept and didn't wake up again along the way, and that was it.

"I spent more than two years in Libya. Within the first year, the situation was still fair enough for people to stay, but a lot of Nigerians had thought these Libyans the business of buying and selling Nigerian females and it was no longer safe.

"If I had gone as a documented migrant, I would have probably stayed to work longer. But even with your documents and permit, Libya was not safe as at the time I returned. The policemen were already corrupted and they knew that Nigerian women were a business for them.

"If they had the opportunity of catching one or two, that was like 10,000 to 15,000 Denas. It was really cool cash for Libyans. They would steal you and sell you to their business partners."

Relieving her travel experience, Tito said: "I travelled in June 2017. I am supposed to be a B.Sc holder, but I am currently trying to get my result because I didn't get it before I travelled.

"Before I left, my school fee was very high and I found that I was having a lot of outstanding results from my second year to my final year. The school couldn't help me look for my result and that became a bit frustrating.

"Then I tried to do business. My mum and I started a business and it was in that process I met with some of my cousins who I had not bonded with all my life. They came up with the idea of travelling. That was how I joined them.

"I was the one who funded the trip. We have these extended family cousins outside the country who funded the trip. The agreement was that I was going to pay them N8 million over a period of time when I got abroad.

"With what they told me, I could get a job of N300,000, and from my calculations, I should be able to run two jobs and pay them in less than four years."

Along the way, Tito said, "I discovered that most of these people lie to ladies. When I got to Libya, I saw a different thing entirely. Some of the ladies I met there had already settled the money but they were not doing any legitimate job. Some of them were getting as low as N50,000 and not the N300,000 monthly they were told.

"My parents were aware of my travelling, but my dad actually kicked against it as a teacher. He was pushing for me to stay back home and get my result. He had dreams for me to study abroad before things became difficult for him.

"In spite of things becoming difficult, he still had the dream of training me, but I was very desperate. I had seen my mates graduate without having issues.

"My mum was the person my cousins actually used to

make the journey possible. They were able to penetrate her."

She further said: "I met a lot of people from countries like Ghana and Gambia, among others, in the course of the journey. An elderly man died in the Hilux van conveying us. He was buried in a shallow grave and the journey continued.

"In Libya, I met one Nigerian who bought us from the driver. Within the few hours we stayed in his house, I was already scared of staying in Libya. He gave us an ultimatum to pay the sum of N300,000 each or stay in his house and work or he would sell us to someone else to get his money. He did all this violently.

"He separated two of my female cousins and in one room and kept the male in another room. We had to call our people who sent N1 million to release us."

"At the point of pushing us into a boat to go to Italy," Tito said, "they would search us violently like criminals. They were shooting sporadically each time they asked us to sit down and we failed to, because we did not understand their language.

"I got arrested along the line and was taken to Garian Prison. UN officials later came and moved us to Tripoli. I was in detention centre at Tripoli for three months till IOM came and I signed to come back home."

Explaining how she was trafficked by her mother's friend, Chizzy said: "I went to Libya in 2016, and it was my mother's friend that trafficked me.

"I was schooling in National Open University. When I could not continue with my studies, she told me there was an opportunity for me if I could travel to Libya. She said if I worked there for some time, I would return to Nigeria to continue with my studies.

"I saw it as an opportunity and left. I spent about three months on the road before I got to Libya. When I got to Libya, she said I had spent too much time on the road and that she had resold me to a Ghanaian who changed my name. I am using a Ghanaian passport.

"From then, I started working as a slave. They told me that I was going to pay for a year and six months.

"We starved seriously in the desert and could not communicate with people outside. Many of us could not make it to Libya.

"When I started facing challenges in Libya, I was taken to the prison. From the prison, they resold me to another person and, for a month, my mother, who is hypertensive, could not contact me. Coming back home was a big relief."

Going back memory lane, Sammy, a graduate of Business Administration, narrated how poor salary and lack of job satisfaction made him to join the Libya train.

He said: "I completed my National Youth Service in 2015, after which I searched for a job to no avail. I ended up picking up a security job and earning N30,000 monthly.

"The salary was grossly insufficient for me to take care of myself, not to talk of sending something to my parents.

"Along the line, someone introduced me to the Libyan journey, but my destination was Italy. He told me that we would only spend two weeks to get to Italy. When I heard that, it burst my bubble and I decided to take the risk in order to raise my standard of living.

"I raised N120,000 from my salary and the tips I got from opening the gates for people as a security man.

"My mum is late, but I told my dad that I was going Zamfara to work as a teacher, because that was where I did my youth service working as a teacher. I told him that the people at my place of primary assignment called that they needed me. My plan was that when I got to Italy, I would surprise all of them with a call."

Speaking on his experience, he said: "My stay in Libya was not a palatable experience. For the first time in my life, I slept in a house without windows or doors. We were very vulnerable. It was not something that I imagined in my life, but my hope of getting to Europe kept me going.

"But it was a different story when I got to Libya. I was promised two weeks to get to Europe, but I ended up spending one and a half years in Libya and never had a glimpse of Italy. I was never arrested or put in prison in Libya, but I was robbed several times by the Arabs."

We've been assisting deported migrants, others - NIDCOM

Spokesperson of Nigeria in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM), Rahman Balogun, says the federal government has always assisted migrants who did not voluntarily return.

He said: "If they return without informing anybody, there is no how they will get any support, because we would not even know that they are in town.

"But if they show that they are in town and show interest that they need support in this area, we normally refer them to the relevant agency, depending on their request.

"If they want to learn a trade, we would refer them to the NDE. The refugee commission has a programme for them too. We also do refer them to some private NGOs for training."



• IOM staff helping a group of migrants rescued at sea Credit: IOM Twitter account



• Migrants travelling through the desert