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The role of private sector leaders in irregular migration & reintegration of returnees

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In 2014, Therietta Vershima was a single mum, School drop out and a struggling pastry chef. A friend and colleague introduced her to another friend who sold her the idea of “japaing”- travelling to Malaysia – with the promise of a better job, better salary, and better life. Therietta’s plan was to earn money to first pay back the agent for the travel expenses and then to save enough money to buy her own equipment for pastry making and event planning. What she didn’t know was that she would end up in one of the Nigerian connection houses notorious for prostitution in Libya. She eventually escaped from the house after about 18 hard months.

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Therietta shared her story in an event, organised by the Christopher Kolade Centre for Research in Leadership and Ethics, Lagos Business School, to discuss ‘The role of private sector leaders in promoting safe migration and reintegration of returnees in Nigeria’. Her story is not an isolated case.

But what are the push factors? Why would someone give up everything, and sometimes even borrow heavily, to leave for the unknown? Omotola Fawumi, executive director of The Rebirth Hub Africa, explained that for the majority of returnees, their blind trust and lack of access to information were what turned them into victims of traffickers. In 2019, a graduate of the University of Ibadan reached out to Omotola. She was working as a maid under inhumane conditions in Oman. This wasn’t her dream. She had paid heavily to leave Nigeria for an ‘opportunity to teach English Language to Arabs’. That opportunity had come from someone she trusted and so she didn’t bother to probe the information. As Omotola advised, we need to probe every source. It doesn’t matter whether the information comes from a close relative or friend or a religious leader, probe every opportunity!

This is where the private sector comes in. They can provide Migrant resource centres in as many local government areas as possible. While many people have access to the Internet, many others especially in the hinterland, do not. Migrant resource centres can help set up information desks to bridge that gap. One group already doing something in that area is IOM UN Nigeria with their MAM – migrants as messengers programme. They are migrant returnees who interview other returned migrants to share candid and emotional video testimonies for further sensitization on irregular migration.

Fortunately, private individuals or business ventures entering this sector do not enter alone. They have the support of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), The Rebirth Hub and other such organisations. Saskia Kok, head of migrant protection and assistance unit in IOM Nigeria, specifically called on big businesses as well as SMEs to partner with the IOM. Providing safe migration structures and reintegration of returnees is a shared responsibility between the Nigerian government and the private sector. In this respect, a single actor alone is not effective. There is need for an enabling environment where migration is done out of choice and not out of necessity. Meanwhile, the IOM works with the public and private sector in reintegrating returnees into their

communities so that they don't fall victims again to irregular migration. Private sector can help provide training programs, internships, mentorship, and so on. In return, they gain good publicity as well as demonstrate business commitment and leadership to prevent trafficking in persons.

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