



# Gender-sensitive responses to returnees from foreign terrorist organisations: insights for practitioners

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## Introduction and background

In some contexts, such as the return of foreign terrorist fighters and their families from Syria and Iraq, there are not only those suspected of terrorism but also people associated with terrorist groups, many of them victims of abduction, coercion and exploitation. For women returning to Europe from Syria and Iraq, their experiences of, and association with, terrorist groups vary greatly. Recognising that an approach limited to security and punishment is inadequate to deal with those situations, the UN Security Council and General Assembly have called on States to develop and implement “comprehensive and tailored strategies” for the screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration (SPRR) of persons associated or affiliated with designated terrorist organisations, and their families <sup>(1)</sup>. Across Europe there is a normative legal commitment to gender-sensitive responses and gender mainstreaming SPRR, but in practice this has been harder to achieve. This paper focuses specifically on the rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) component of SPRR. The paper highlights the gendered experiences of women in Daesh, then focuses on the gender needs of women returnees. The second part of the paper identifies R&R involvement in various professions supporting women returnees from Daesh to the European Union (EU). The paper then provides some recommendations for professionals working towards the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees.

### Terminology

Much of the terminology in this sector is contested. For the purposes of this paper please note the following:

1. *Gender*: A frequent error in reporting is conflating biological categories (male and female) with social categories (men and women). Gender refers to the social attributes, roles, and opportunities associated with being male and female in a society <sup>(2)</sup>.
2. *Gender Mainstreaming*: “is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women, as well as girls, boys and men, an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetrated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality” <sup>(3)</sup>.
3. *Gender-Sensitive Responses*: There are no gender-neutral interventions. There are often differential gender-based outcomes in SPRR; for returnees, their families and the communities in which R&R occurs. Therefore gender-sensitive responses take into account the particularities pertaining to the lives of both women and men. Aiming to eliminate inequalities and promote gender equality, including an equal distribution of resources, responses also address and take into account the gender dimension <sup>(4)</sup>.
4. *Radicalisation*: Radicalisation is a complex gendered process. Policy documents define it as, “the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies associated with terrorist groups” <sup>(5)</sup>. There is no single root cause of radicalisation <sup>(6)</sup>. Not all factors feature in every case, and there is often considerable variation. Research has highlighted that radicalisation is the result of the interaction of both personal

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<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council in UNSCR 2396 (2017)

<sup>2</sup> OSAGI (2001) 'Gender mainstreaming: strategy for promoting gender equality'; Brown, K. E (2019) Gender Mainstreaming in PVE.

<sup>3</sup> Economic and Social Council. 1997. Agreed conclusions. Section 2.

<sup>4</sup> UNODC (n/d) Gender Responsiveness

<sup>5</sup> Revised Prevent Duty Guidance for England and Wales, 2015, definition.

<sup>6</sup> University of Amsterdam (2013), SAFIRE.

psychological factors (e.g., individual vulnerability, quests for significance and mortality salience) and environmental factors (e.g., social relationships, community attitudes) <sup>(7)</sup>.

5. *Returnees*: This term is used to describe those returning, seeking to return, or who have returned from Daesh to the EU. It does not differentiate between those who returned through their own endeavours, those who returned voluntarily with support from the EU Member States and third parties, or those who are repatriated involuntarily.
6. *SPRR: Screening* refers to the initial process of determining the main profile of a person in order to recommend particular treatment: including further investigation or prosecution; or direct participation in a rehabilitation and/or reintegration programmes. *Rehabilitation* can be considered as a set of measures aimed to support the transition from being associated with Daesh to a citizen of the community, abandoning the use of violent means to achieve change, generating income to cater for families' needs and avoiding recidivism. Rehabilitation may take place in residential centres or communities and includes deradicalisation, psychosocial support, and mental health counselling, and supporting those with physical disabilities. *Reintegration* applies to all the different categories of persons associated with Daesh, as defined during screening. Reintegration should also cater to specific needs and harness the capacities of different categories. Reintegration processes should be community-based and led, and address social, economic, and political dimensions as identified by communities <sup>(8)</sup>. UNODC finds the SPRR needs to: have integrated R&R components; be based on a whole-of-government approach; involve civil society actors; avoid stereotypes regarding roles of men and women in terrorist groups; and, should pay particular attention to the situation of women and children associated with the terrorist group <sup>(9)</sup>.

## Context

Approximately 800 women and 1300 children with links to European countries and with probable links to extremist organisations remain in the MENA region <sup>(10)</sup>. The increasing instability in the MENA region, the lack of provisions and security in the displacement camps, and the pressures of Covid-19 pandemic, mean there is urgency to facilitate the return of EU citizens—especially women and children <sup>(11)</sup>. The UN and the European Council have highlighted how over the past two years the human rights, security and health situation for many in the camps has deteriorated significantly <sup>(12)</sup>.

The R&R of European women associated with foreign terrorist organisations have not taken place in all countries. According to Save the Children, 25 of nearly 60 home countries have repatriated their nationals from the conflict zone of Iraq and Syria <sup>(13)</sup>. In the first 10 weeks of 2021 only three repatriation efforts took place, with two further operations occurring in July 2021 to Belgium, Finland and German (totalling approximately 40 women and children). In 2020, 17 global repatriation efforts were recorded, and 29 efforts were noted in 2019. Given the numbers of women and children remaining, the mounting international and humanitarian pressure, and the proactive return of European nationals by Kurdish authorities, it is expected that EU Member States will repatriate and rehabilitate women and children affiliated to terrorist organisations more speedily and in greater numbers than at present.

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<sup>7</sup> Allan, H., et. al. (2015) Drivers of Violent Extremism.

<sup>8</sup> This text is derived from African Union (2018) Pillar Paper.

<sup>9</sup> UNODC (n/d) Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Strategies.

<sup>10</sup> Of these nearly half are within al-Hol and al-Roj IDP Camps. Renard, T and R. Coolsaet (2020) From Bad to worse; Annamaneni K. (2019) For ISIS Children; Cook, J. and G. Vale (2019) From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II.

<sup>11</sup> CTED (2021) Covid Analysis.

<sup>12</sup> Council of Europe. (2021) Commissioner observations on the repatriation of European nationals; United Nations (2019) Key Principles; CTED (2019) Gender Dimensions of the Response to Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters; CTED (@019) Gender Dimensions

<sup>13</sup> Save the Children (2021). Repatriation of Foreign Children; Save the Children (2021) Repatriations show giving children future; BBC (2020) Germany and Finland bring home women.

SPRR of women and children, as well as of men, is the sole responsibility of individual EU Member States. In some countries, the legal framework delegates these responsibilities and associated tasks to municipalities, with differing practices, budgets and priorities. Practitioner experiences, policy contexts, and legal frameworks will therefore vary across the EU. However these lie within a wider international and regional human rights and security context. There are two main UN handbooks for supporting the SPRR of women linked to terrorism, one published in 2017 by the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the other in 2018 by UN Office for Counter Terrorism (UNOCT). Hedayah also provided a blueprint for a R&R centre for terrorist fighters and their families <sup>(14)</sup>. Guidelines and advice at the EU level were provided by RAN <sup>(15)</sup>. InFoEx workshop in 2019 on FTF SPRR also provided valuable insights for practitioners <sup>(16)</sup>.

## Gendered needs of returnees in SPRR

*“Women and children associated with foreign terrorist fighters returning or relocating to and from conflict may have served in many different roles, including as supporters, facilitators, or perpetrators of terrorist acts, and require special focus when developing tailored prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies.” The UN Security Council in UNSCR 2396 (2017)*

### Experiences in Daesh

Understanding the individual pathways of women (and their children) affiliated with Daesh is an important—although not sufficient—part of responding to the gendered needs of returnees. However, a significant challenge facing practitioners is the lack of verifiable information that can be easily generalised and applied to individual cases. Since verifiable information is only rarely released to practitioners in advance of the repatriation, most of the information is dependent upon testimony of the women and children returning. In some cases, information is also gathered from family members, charity workers, and third country officials. While it is tempting to rely on generalised information, such as that from the media or academic research, each case will have its own unique markers and journeys. Salma and Zahra Halane had a brother who allegedly left the UK in 2013 to join Daesh, and their father is known to be a prominent reciter of the Quran within his community, running a school described by his son as ‘quite intensive’ in terms of Quranic studies <sup>(17)</sup>. In contrast, Linda Wenzel, a 16 year old German teenager, reported as a ‘quiet’ girl, became a convert, and after meeting her future husband (an ISIS fighter) online, left for Iraq in 2016 <sup>(18)</sup>. Lubna Miludi, a Spanish national born in Morocco, says she travelled in 2014 to help orphans in Syria <sup>(19)</sup>. These three examples are indicative of the diversity of women in terms of age, experiences, religiosity, ethnicity and education <sup>(20)</sup>. The varied and complex pathways to Iraq and Syria among European women, and the lack of third-party evidence, means practitioners and the supporting institutions need to be adaptable. This is reinforced by the UN: “There must be individual assessment and screening to appropriately assess each case and determine each person’s affiliation and/or victimhood, while taking into account age and gender considerations” <sup>(21)</sup>. The Counter-Terrorism Committee Madrid Guiding Principles and its Addendum provide practical and policy guidance <sup>(22)</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Hedayah (2020) Blueprint

<sup>15</sup> See Further Reading.

<sup>16</sup> Koller, S. (2020) Reintegration of Returnees from Syria and Iraq

<sup>17</sup> Windsor, L. (2018) The Language of Radicalization.

<sup>18</sup> Vonberg (2017) [German schoolgirl who allegedly joined ISIS maybe tried in Iraq.](#)

<sup>19</sup> Dolz (2019) The Jihadist Women Spain wants to bring back home; see also Windsor (2018) The Language of Radicalization: Female Internet Recruitment.

<sup>20</sup> See also: van San (2018) Belgian and Dutch Young Men and Women who joined ISIS.

<sup>21</sup> United Nations (2019) Key Principles; CTED (2019) Gender Dimensions.

<sup>22</sup> Counter-Terrorism Committee (2018) Madrid Guiding Principles and its Addendum.

Nevertheless, some general points can be helpful for shaping the practitioner's insights into the women's testimony. Life prior to travelling to the conflict zone and the reasons for travelling to Iraq and Syria are shaped by gender as well as other intersectional identity markers. Women in the first wave to the conflict zone tended to travel as family units, and motivation was often linked to preserving the family unit as much as ideological conviction or belief. Later waves included women travelling with peers or alone, or in support of family travelling earlier—in these cases we can consider a greater degree of autonomy and agency. Women tended to be better educated than men when controlling for other socio-demographic factors, and did not have the same track record for prior convictions or involvement with the criminal justice system. In fact, they were not often in paid employment—most were students or full-time mothers and housewives. Women joining Daesh were also more likely to be converts than men <sup>(23)</sup>.

The experiences of women living in the conflict zone are diverse but often shaped by insecurity, fear, instability, violence and—paradoxically—ordinary mundane family life <sup>(24)</sup>. The importance of motherhood to Daesh is established simply by the significant number of children born to Daesh-affiliated women, and in interviews with women affiliated with Daesh, 97.4% said their role was as a mother or wife <sup>(25)</sup>. For some women, family life included owning slaves and the provision of housing was only possible because of the ethnic cleansing of Shi'a and minorities by Daesh in Iraq and Syria <sup>(26)</sup>. For the majority of foreign women life was family orientated, and they only indirectly interacted with Daesh leadership through male family members <sup>(27)</sup>. Evidence so far indicates that the majority of women were not directly involved in the operational activities of Daesh, and if they contributed at all, did so through running the women's hostels, promoting the group online, recruiting other women and girls, or working in gender segregated education and medical professions <sup>(28)</sup>. Only in 2018 did Daesh change its policy towards women's direct involvement in combat or direct violence, and even then it was exceptional <sup>(29)</sup>. As Daesh grew even greater and more explicit restrictions were imposed specifically on women <sup>(30)</sup>. Women's travel within Daesh territory was dependent on the authorisation of their male relatives, and widows of Daesh combatants were forbidden to leave. Those caught helping them faced punishment <sup>(31)</sup>. Daesh violence is widely reported, and the spectacular and public manner in which it was carried out served as warnings to others. They made examples of men but there are fewer accounts of public executions or punishments of women; the so-called Al-Khansaa Brigade <sup>(32)</sup> who upheld Daesh rules and regulations pertaining to women, tended to carry out punishments outside of public view <sup>(33)</sup>. Given challenges of evidencing individual women's roles and activities while in Iraq and Syria, the diversity of their experiences and motives, and their likely agenda to minimise their involvement with Daesh to facilitate repatriation, it is essential that systematic gender-sensitive screening and risk assessment processes are carried out, and where appropriate this lead to

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<sup>23</sup> Dawson, L. (2021) A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq.

<sup>24</sup> Khelghat-Doost, H. (2017). Women of the Caliphate; Khelghat-Doost (2021) *The Strategic Logic of Women in Jihadi Organizations*.

<sup>25</sup> Approximately 6,577 children were born in Iraq/Syria to international Daesh affiliated parents. The experience of children born to ISIS parents is varied, with a significant difference between girls and boys. There are also examples of children rebelling against ISIS and refusing to accept their indoctrination. Cook, J. and Vale, G. (2019) From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II. Speckhard, A. and Ellenberg, M. D. (2020). *ISIS in Their Own Words*.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Schuetze (2021) *ISIS Fighter Convicted in Death of Enslaved 5-Year-Old Girl*; DW (2021) *German Court jails IS bride for Crimes Against Humanity*.

<sup>27</sup> Vale, G. (2019) *Women in Islamic State from Caliphate to Camps*.

<sup>28</sup> Spencer, A. N. (2016). *The hidden face of terrorism*; Gan, R. et al (2019) *Change is the Only Constant*.

<sup>29</sup> Women's participation in violence serves to shame men and prioritises defensive action. This might be interpreted as a sign of empowering the women who joined them (a number of whom articulated a desire to engage in violence), but it is also controversial theologically, causes tension within jihadist groups, and can be seen as a sign of weakness undermining the religio-political narrative of Daesh as protector of women. Lahoud, N. (2017) *Can Women Be Soldiers of the Islamic State?*; Perešin, A. (2018) *Why Women from the West are Joining ISIS*; Al-Dayel, N. (2021) *Sexual Suppression and Political Agency*; Brown, K. E. (2018) *Gendered Violence*.

<sup>30</sup> Daesh stated in an edict: "it is not permissible for the people of the Islamic State to travel to the territories of the infidels, and they should be prevented from doing so". Daesh, (2014) *Fatwa 48*.

<sup>31</sup> Daesh, (2014) *Fatwa 46*; Daesh, (2016) *Untitled Document [Letter from Abu Fahd al-Tūnisī]*.

<sup>32</sup> A select group of women who operated a parallel morality police (sometimes known as the *Hisbah*) for Daesh.

<sup>33</sup> Vale, G. (2020) *Defying Rules. Defying Gender?*

prosecution. The information generated then needs to be shared with practitioners involved in R&R.

Since the fall of Daesh, we have numerous reports of women and children living in hazardous conditions, risking kidnap, sexual and gender-based violence, retaliatory violence, further Daesh-led violence, summary arrest, and unfair trials or detention <sup>(34)</sup>. This means that, within the IDP camps, women may fake compliance and support for Daesh to avoid conflict with other women supporters, and seek marriages of convenience. At the same time, they may minimise their contribution to Daesh in order to avoid conflict with and other civilians. Some European women are resisting repatriation and continue to support Daesh and enforce Daesh ideology in the camps. This adds to the challenges facing European authorities as they engage in the entire of SPRR process, and further highlights the importance of case-by-case and discretionary structural professional judgement based risk assessments <sup>(35)</sup>.

## Women returnees' immediate and short-term needs

*Beliefs:* Recognising Daesh propaganda regarding the importance of women as a category to the group's operations and to the group's overall legitimacy should not be conflated with an individual women's contribution to the group or their beliefs. Practitioners need to keep an open mind regarding women's beliefs and radicalisation, and should not rely on their private held beliefs on religion or gender equality. This may seem counterintuitive but testimony from a number of women explain their beliefs as structured around family, following Islam, and frustration with States' domestic and foreign policies, and experiences of Islamophobia (perceived or real). Additionally, women's testimonies point to disillusionment when Daesh failed to provide security and eliminate discrimination in their allegedly "post-racial state". In some cases, this means questioning their underlying identity and beliefs about the ideal Caliphate, while in others it simply means believing Daesh are not the group to deliver on these goals. Beliefs are also shaped by women's experiences in the IDP camps and with Iraqi, Kurdish, Turkish and other security forces and judicial institutions, with potential resentment to European and local authorities for their predicament—rather than blaming Daesh. This may make them distrustful of those seeking to support their return; supporters of Daesh are perpetuating rumours that foreign women are being forcibly returned against their will, violating their rights, and so on. Moreover, certain extreme beliefs may have been normalised while in Daesh territory, including those pertaining to appropriate gender norms and behaviours. For example, women returnee's willingness to cooperate with men will vary. Experiences from practitioners so far indicate that women on return tend to trust medical professionals but not others, which can cause tension with inter-agency cooperation and mean women's collaboration with authorities maybe transactional, demonstrate superficial compliance, or become dependent upon provision of services <sup>(36)</sup>.

*Behaviours:* As with exit, disengagement and deradicalisation work generally, addressing underlying health and psychological conditions is an immediate concern—specifically, being mindful of women's potential exposure to gender-based violence, domestic violence and coercion within marriage, and co-dependency with their children. Women's agency is therefore complex, and their narratives are likely to be fractured and uncertain. There is some evidence suggesting that younger women will demonstrate risky behaviours, including self-harm. It is worth noting that PTSD among women is often undiagnosed as symptoms present differently to men. For women not facing imprisonment, establishing routine will be important. Practitioners would also be mindful of when to schedule appointments and meetings to mitigate

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<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch (2021) Thousands of Foreigners Unlawfully Held; Renard, T and R. Coolsaet (2020) From Bad to worse.

<sup>35</sup> Structured Professional Risk Assessments are best practice for risk assessments in cases of radicalisation. Hart, S.D. & Logan, C. (2011). Formulation of violence risk using evidence-based assessments: The Structured Professional Judgment approach. In P. Sturmey & M. McMurrin (Eds.), *Forensic case formulation* (pp. 83-106). Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell. Logan, C & Lloyd, M (2018). Violent extremism: A comparison of approaches to assessing and managing risk. *Legal & Criminological Psychology*. DOI: 10.1111/lcrp.12140, p.3

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous comments from EU PBC practitioner meeting.



impact on everyday routines and R&R activities—for example, reporting at police stations in the early morning might interfere with taking children to school.

*Belonging:* In the short- and medium-term professionals will need to establish connections to returnees' family, but it cannot be assumed they are either a supportive or a hindering factor in the R&R. Identifying the level of support or barriers to women's R&R will help determine what other support is needed: relocation or housing or translation services, for example. One potential concern is navigating complex relationships regarding caring roles for children returning with their mothers. It may be extended family members, grandparents, foster parents, state or local authorities who take on this role. These individuals will need support negotiating the involvement of the mother in future parenting decisions of children. As French and Belgium practitioners have established, it is important to give mothers time to prepare their children and themselves for likely separation—in most cases, for a number of years. This will mean reassuring women of how they may contact their children in the future and of their children's safety. To that end, having other women with similar experiences available will be helpful to returnees; however this is harder for women as there is less of a support network of 'formers' <sup>(37)</sup> than for men, and generally speaking the numbers of returnees are very small. Where possible having legal and welfare support to assist with administrative processes from the outset may minimise delays in reintegration, such as accessing housing and welfare support, registering with doctors, schools, and so on.

## Women returnees' medium and long-term needs

*Beliefs:* Support finding new belief and identity structures will be important—not all women will recognise their beliefs as 'radical' or 'extremist', they may minimise their connections to Daesh; and some won't accept 'wrongdoing', as they will emphasise their 'best intentions' vis-à-vis their family and children. Some feel betrayed by their home countries for their slow repatriation, and wider societal stigmatisation upon return may make women and children vulnerable to future narratives of extremist groups which exploit any perceived Islamophobia in Europe. Some will also feel betrayed by Daesh—having experienced the 'say-do-gap' between rhetoric and reality of their support for women, especially younger women who believed that they would have free choice in marriage. There is a need to build up women's knowledge of specific vulnerabilities to radicalisation, to minimise the risk of re-radicalisation and re-recruitment—especially a concern where there is a lack of 'meaning' or 'significance' in their lives. Help to find new purpose and new interests is crucial. Professionals cannot assume that local religious institutions have the resources or knowledge to support any realignment of women's beliefs, and they may need additional reassurances from authorities. Prison Chaplains may be more equipped due to wider exposure of trauma within the general prison population.

*Behaviours:* Women require employment, and training to successfully re-establish their lives; employment must mean, meaningful employment, otherwise the lack of meaning mentioned above increase their future vulnerability, especially if they are no longer the primary care givers for their children. Women should be given opportunities for empowerment, and acknowledged as potential agents of change, so that they can become less dependent on the state in the long run. It is harder for women to become 'formers' as a route to achieve this, as this space is seen as a "mens' club" <sup>(38)</sup>. It is important to work with local communities and as part of an integrated gender-sensitive PVE and strategic communications campaign to increase options for women returnees, reduce stigma, but also to minimise the perception that 'bad behaviour' is rewarded. Education and employment maybe overlooked for women in the initial phases of return as practitioners focus on supporting mothering roles and supporting children. Establishing new positive parenting relationships and styles can help to mitigate for co-dependency that may have built up in Iraq/Syria, or to overcome fear and distrust that might have arisen between mother and children, due to their situation. It is important to be mindful that some women may

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<sup>37</sup> Formers describes those who have left extremist groups and now support others in EXIT or work in P/CVE broadly

<sup>38</sup> Schmidt, R. (2020) Duped.

defer their needs in favour of their children's. This behaviour can mean that R&R support and oversight is not seen as being effective and may mistakenly result in its early removal.

*Belonging:* A significant matter is the general lack of family support for women extremist offenders during their detention or upon release, and there is reasonable concern that this will apply to returnees. Families may shun them for dishonouring them, or may instead be complicit, supporting extremist beliefs and behaviours, thereby harming R&R. In contrast, practitioners often identify the families of male extremist offenders' as protective and supportive factors for rehabilitation. Marriages may need to be annulled or divorces granted to allow for new beginnings within communities, returnee women may have complex relationships and responses to the father(s) of their children. That can mean establishing new legal identities for children—especially where citizenship is conferred by parentage—and identifying paternal families' rights, acknowledging that these might cause further conflict. We cannot assume communities are equipped or willing for women to be reintegrated, and some communities may place additional pressures on women to continue support for Daesh <sup>(39)</sup>.

### Gender-specific considerations for practitioners

#### *Immediate and short-term*

1. Trauma. Women's ability to coherently discuss and process trauma from living within the conflict zone, the IDP camps, and from any prior gender-based violence, will not be immediate. Support from trained PTSD and gender-based violence professionals may enable women to communicate more effectively with other practitioners and facilitate their R&R.
2. Reconfiguring Motherhood. Motherhood within Daesh is a key feature of their ideology and women's lives. However, it is heavily 'weaponised' and 'instrumentalised' for the good of the group. Women will need support reconfiguring what motherhood will be in practice (especially if they are not to be the primary caregivers) and how to develop appropriate bonds with their children in the new environments.
3. Supporting Networks. Women returnees may not have the wider support of their family, and even if they do, families may not wish to discuss returnees' experiences—which may hinder returnees' R&R. Practitioners may need to help the returnee identify alternative support networks. Families and other support networks will therefore need guidance and their own support to enable them to support the returnee (and her children).
4. Scheduling Appointments and Support. There needs to be coordination across agencies and with the returnee to minimise disruption to her efforts to establish normalcy—for example, avoiding clashes with taking children to and from school. Women also report that their concerns, experiences and insights are dismissed and minimised by practitioners, and that they are "not taken seriously". Efforts should be made to engage cooperatively and build trust.

#### *Medium and long-term*

1. Transferable skills. While men had a variety of roles in Daesh <sup>(40)</sup>, due to strict gender segregation rules, women's time was typically spent in family and home-centred tasks, combined with their lack of prior employment, means vocational training and developing transferable skills is important. Women's R&R therefore requires external financial

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<sup>39</sup> RAN (2021) Conclusion Paper; PBC and RAN (2021) Conclusion Paper. See Further Reading.

<sup>40</sup> Daesh set itself up as a governing authority, and therefore "employed" men in a variety of roles to facilitate the functioning of its society. It drew on extreme violence and normalised violence in everyday governing to ensure compliance of the population within its territories – including those within the group, and this should not

support and (re)training. There is a tendency to assume 'traditional' women's activities (e.g. sewing or beauty industries) as appropriate, but this risks inadvertently affirming Daesh gender ideologies, diminishing their other interests and academic achievements, and they may be excluded from some (e.g. working with children or vulnerable persons). Other potential work may not be suited due to administrative measures— e.g. translation work or computer coding at home would require unrestricted computer access which that may be prohibited.

2. Double deviancy of women. Women face additional stigma and shame upon their return. Their communities may view them as transgressors on two fronts: first for supporting terrorism and violent extremism; second, for breaching gender norms. Practitioners need to consider how to work effectively with communities to mitigate stigma and scaremongering.
3. Establishing new 'significance'. Consideration of how redirecting activities need to be meaningful as well as occupying time is essential. Working with established local community gender norms may help women reintegrate within their communities. However, if a motivation to join Daesh was to escape these, it is unlikely to be effective in the long run.
4. Identifying achievable goals and proportionate de-escalation of interventions. Goals often identified for de-radicalisation and Exit work are based on a male norm that are not always appropriate for women. Childcare responsibilities may prohibit full-time work, women's access to and participation in group sports is generally more limited, not all mosques have the space or personnel to support returnee women, and, in some Muslim communities mosque attendance for women is rare so it would be culturally inappropriate.
5. Building trust between agencies and with Returnee women and their families. Careful case management, information-sharing (within the boundaries of professional codes of practice) and coordination between agencies and all parties will reduce distrust arising from contradictory demands, goals and advice, and not delivering on promised outcomes, will also reduce non-compliance or superficial compliance, and mitigate changes in practitioner personnel.
6. Working with society and local communities in an integrated gender-sensitive PVE strategy, that may address wider issues of marginalisation, discrimination and Islamophobia, This may also include enhancing wider provisions for protecting women from all forms of violence (VAW) and engaging with the Women Peace and Security agenda at the state and EU level.

## Approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration

Analysis of European responses shows there three generic models to R&R for returnee women<sup>(41)</sup>. The first are parenting models that focus on (re)establishing women as 'good mothers', strengths within the relationships, and harness women's existing motivations; well-being models that address physical, mental, emotional and spiritual components of the returnee women; and, deradicalisation and security models that focus on belonging, beliefs and behaviours of returnee women. Another global review recommended an integrated framework incorporating five levels (individual, family, educational, community, and societal) and identifies five primary goals: 1) promoting individual mental health and well-being; 2) promoting family

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be underestimated in our analysis. Towards the last two years men's lives were increasingly drawn into violence and fighting outside forces which changed the dynamics of families and women's lives in Daesh. (Brown 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Brown and Mohammed (forthcoming). ICCT.

support; 3) promoting educational success; 4) promoting community support; and 5) improving structural conditions and protecting public safety <sup>(42)</sup>.

## Security and justice sectors

Security and justice sectors are primarily concerned with screening and potential prosecution (the S&P of SPRR) but have a significant influence on the R&R process and context. Research into judicial proceedings by the UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UNCTED) reveals a “continued gender bias with regard to sentencing practices, with women accused of providing material support to terrorist groups receiving comparatively lenient sentences based on the assumption that they were duped under false pretences” <sup>(43)</sup>. While noting that assessment tools are not ‘tick-box’ exercises and require professional judgement, they are designed using ‘gender-blind’ data sets and models of radicalisation (in other words, the male experience of radicalisation is assumed as the norm). These tools are therefore less helpful in their determination of women extremists’ continued risk of reoffending and deradicalisation. This puts women at risk of relapse into radicalization and can undermine the R&R efforts undertaken <sup>(44)</sup>. Good practice does exist. For example, in the Netherlands 15 women convicted of terrorism charges are held in a bespoke high-security wing, with a child-friendly visiting centre, and gender-appropriate skills training and R&R activities on offer <sup>(45)</sup>. A concern raised in Germany is where children show little interest in ongoing relationships with their (detained) mothers, which brings to fore longer term considerations for women’s identity and sense of belonging within society, and therefore their rehabilitation <sup>(46)</sup>. This means that while it may be expedient to focus on disengagement or reintegration in the short term (through addressing behaviours), it is imperative not to ignore their beliefs and modes of belonging <sup>(47)</sup>.

## Social and healthcare sectors

An initial consideration for these sectors is whether accepting their support is a compulsory requirement of return or release, or whether it is voluntary. Voluntary participation is believed to deliver longer lasting results—but refusal to engage can have consequences for children’s well-being that will need monitoring regardless of returning women’s acceptance of support. It is important for these sectors to differentiate among, and perhaps have separate case workers for, women returnees and their children, so as to establish and advocate for their different needs. In Sweden, for instance, returnee women identify their parenting as ‘good mothering’ – highlighting how they prioritised their children’s needs over their own and that their parenting styles reflected positive values. However, practitioners urged caution in assuming that women will prioritise their children’s wellbeing, and had examples of women strategically leveraging their children in order to expediate return to Europe, while maintaining radical beliefs and behaviours <sup>(48)</sup>.

Health and social care sectors initially focus on social and welfare support for establishing security and stability within the new context for the women returnees. Practitioners need to additionally recognise that women often cannot talk about their trauma or experiences due to societal shame and community norms. Finding networks for women may mean drawing on equivalent or similar support groups—such as domestic violence or refugee charities—and working with these groups to accommodate women returnee’s different experiences <sup>(49)</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Weine, S., et. a. (2020). Rapid Review.

<sup>43</sup> CTED (2019) Analytical Brief on the prosecution of ISIL Associated Women; CTED (2019) Gender Dimensions.

<sup>44</sup> CTED (2019) Analytical Brief on the prosecution of ISIL Associated Women.

<sup>45</sup> RAN (2020) *Spotlight: Prisons, Rehabilitations and Reintegration*. See also Section 4.7 UNODC (2016) Handbook.

<sup>46</sup> Anonymous. C.f. Further Reading.

<sup>47</sup> RAN (2019) Gender Specific Approaches to Exit; RAN (2020) Exit Best Practices Collection.

<sup>48</sup> Anonymous. See Further Reading.

<sup>49</sup> Refugee charities may not be able to support women returnees because of potential (re)traumatization of other Syrian and Iraqi refugees they already support.

Medical practitioners will need to consider not only immediate physical needs (including postnatal and neonatal care) but also psychological medical support, as women also display symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and other conditions. However, these are sometimes masked by women in an effort to ensure they remain the primary carer of their children or to prove they are not vulnerable to extremism or a security threat <sup>(50)</sup>. In Kosovo, ongoing care was provided at community health centres (maintaining their non-criminalising approach) rather than in centralised specialist institutions. The expectation is that this would support women's reintegration with communities <sup>(51)</sup>.

## Education and employment sectors

The education sector is primarily focused on children's education and determining whether children will enter mainstream schooling or whether additional support or special schooling is required. Practitioners focused on the needs of children will need to consider to what extent kindergarden and schools should be informed of their parents' actions and of their life experiences in Iraq or Syria. Separate consideration for child returnees is therefore needed <sup>(52)</sup>. Establishing good working relationships and communications with these institutions, ensuring they have the capacity to address behaviours in school that may emerge as a result of trauma, will be important to for the long term R&R of the children and returnee mothers.

For older and teenage women returnees, adult education options may be more appropriate, especially if they left before completing compulsory education but were close to completion. This maybe important where older teenage girls has adult responsibilities in Iraq and Syria, and may not adjust well to being treated as children in schools. Distance learning options could also be considered to allow women to gain skills and qualifications while working and maintaining a family home. Gaining stable employment is often considered essential for R&R; however for women this may take longer due to caring responsibilities and lack of prior experience. For employment and welfare sectors supporting women returnees, considering appropriate forms of volunteering in the charity sector may better support women's R&R than insisting immediately on entering the labour market. At this point the consideration of education and employment for adult women returning from Iraq and Syria is hypothetical as concerns are focused on repatriation and addressing immediate social and psychological needs. However practitioners from Kosovo – where R&R has been ongoing for longer – highlight the importance of recognising and acknowledging women's skills and suggest prioritising women's self-employment as offering better long term successes for R&R <sup>(53)</sup>.

## PVE and municipal partners

Global SPRR advice suggests relating R&R to broader P/CVE efforts. Therefore, early engagement with local community institutions, especially women-led, and women-centred organisations, is essential to enable communities to be involved, and to reduce stigmatisation. Working with these organisations to inform communities about women's experiences and to mitigate community concerns will be essential for long-term R&R. Additionally, whereas much P/CVE work focuses on men or young boys as vulnerable to radicalisation, and women and girls as protective factors, P/CVE practitioners will be required to adjust their gender-based assumptions in this regard in order to support women returnees. Additionally, P/CVE efforts have been criticised as lacking gender mainstreaming. Therefore, R&R of returnees will require PVE and municipal partners to actively engage with and connect to women returnees in the communities. Strasbourg has had an active municipal level involvement and RAN study visits to the city have been informative <sup>(54)</sup>. While these are commendable efforts to recognise

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<sup>50</sup> Sischka, K. (2020). Female Returnees and their children.

<sup>51</sup> RAN (2019) Study Visit - Returned Women and Children.

<sup>52</sup> Brown and Mohammed (forthcoming)

<sup>53</sup> RAN (2019) Study Visit Returned Women and Children.

<sup>54</sup> RAN (2019) Study Visit Strasbourg.

religious leaders (through a specific training programme) in relation to P/CVE and by association SPRR, there is no reference to women's needs or women's leadership.

Experience from Gothenburg in Sweden demonstrates that practitioners cannot assume that the local community is a safe environment for returnees, and how managing anonymity can be a challenge if R&R occurs within home communities, where the women and their families already had a degree of notoriety. They also identified that linking R&R to broader P/CVE efforts was essential given the geographical clustering of radicalisation and affiliation with extremism or terrorism. Particularly they highlighted that given the (relatively) high percentage of women converts within this group, prior (male-dominated) assumptions about the drivers of radicalisation did not hold.<sup>55</sup>

## General lessons learned

This brief review of R&R across different sectors in Europe is necessarily generalised due to the diverse range of practices, and the lack of comparable and longitudinal studies with women returning from Iraq or Syria, as currently the primary concerns are screening and repatriation. Nevertheless a number of practical gender-specific considerations emerge:

- Professionals and practitioners are not specialists in SPRR, and only in a few countries are they experts in P/CVE or Exit work, and have to manage returnees alongside existing case work and often within existing limited resources. Therefore, they lack professional knowledge of Daesh and women returnees. Even those from security or counter-terrorism backgrounds are not accustomed to working with women. Nevertheless, professionals have considerable experience of working with women who have similar experiences of trauma, violence and abuse, and can draw on this background to support their learning about the specific needs of returnees.
- The focus on immediate and short term needs reinforces the gender-blind approach in returnee management and to decontextualising their R&R. Professionals had yet to engage proactively with the communities women will return to, and had not specifically built trust with women leaders and women led groups.
- Trust and effective partnerships between authorities, professionals and the women returning is identified as essential to R&R successes. However, despite interagency cooperation, unclear or conflicting objectives, instrumentalising children returnees' (by all parties), and miscommunication or withheld information, disrupts these efforts.

Gender Sensitive approaches should focus on meeting the gendered needs of returnees, and have an understanding that gender is a component of that person's identity. The centrality of gender to returnee experiences and to the ideology of Daesh makes it a core facet with which to engage. Gender-sensitive approaches call on professionals to address prior assumptions about women's motivations and behaviours within Daesh controlled territories. This allows for consideration of how ideas about femininity (and masculinity) inform the narratives of the self that returnees cast for understanding their past and future lives. It also helps practitioners reflect on the gender appropriateness of activities, locations and frameworks for the SPRR interventions. Gender-sensitive approaches to SPRR recognise how gender also places specific barriers to women's R&R.

## Addressing the gaps in gender-sensitive approaches

There are no gender-neutral interventions, and all practitioners supporting the SPRR process need to be mindful of how their approach meets the specific needs of women returnees. It is clear that significant effort and expertise has been garnered to support women returnees in the

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<sup>55</sup> Anonymous. See also RAN (2021) Conclusion Paper; RAN (2021) Repatriation; RAN and PBC (2021) Conclusion Paper. in Further Reading.

short-term and at the point of repatriation. Less attention, however, has been given to supporting women in the medium- to long-term. While children elicit sympathy and legal protections as victims, and men are treated with due caution as clear security threats, women returnees do not fall easily into either of these groups (although screening may identify them as both), their R&R has not been prioritised until now. In part this is due to the compartmentalisation and exceptionalising of SPRR from wider P/CVE efforts. Experiences across the globe demonstrate the importance of integrating SPRR in an embedded P/CVE and WPS strategy, and that in doing so it encourages policy and practitioners to recognise women's diverse roles, needs and security. Failure to do so not only limits efficacy of P/CVE and SPRR, but also diverges from international human rights obligations<sup>(56)</sup>. Second, there is a reluctance to formalise policy in this area, seemingly due to fear of creating precedent and establishing obligations for the state. Third, although not connected to P/CVE, SPRR is discursively situated within counter-terrorism and security sectors, and as such is hampered by the gender-blind and male dominated assumptions of these fields – even as in practice R&R falls in women-dominated professions<sup>(57)</sup>.

With that in mind the following next steps are brought to the attention of professionals and policymakers:

- Training. Professionals are not expected to become experts in Daesh. However, they do need to be mindful of gender assumptions and unconscious biases pertaining to terrorism. Gender-sensitive training should also take into account intersectionality, and take into consideration matters of religion, race and culture. Experience shows that professional and social assumptions about women's decisions in Iraq/Syria are gendered and culturally conditioned, leading to flawed assessments. This means fully participating in national and professionally appropriate gender-mainstreaming and gender-awareness training.
- Adapt existing indicators and tools to include gender-specific and gender-aware criteria and features. Gender sensitive SPRR processes and indicators should also be culturally appropriate to the returnee's community. For instance, since Muslim communities are not homogenous, gender norms and responsibilities will vary. However, practitioners should not assume the most conservative or traditional leader of that community is 'representative'.
- Early P/CVE Preparation and Engagement. Support communities in advance of R&R efforts—in particular, a) support communities to talk about returning women to avoid reliance on rumours or stereotypes b) develop resources to support women and the community so 'bad behaviour' is not rewarded to the detriment of the community c) strengthen the resources and support already within communities for women and women's organisations within the community. This will help to minimise stigmatisation, remove barriers to R&R, and reduce recidivism, as well as support goals of gender-mainstreaming P/CVE.
- Measuring Success. Support individual women and their children in the long-term; recognise that R&R is not a linear process, and that needs will vary over time. Successful R&R requires women to move on from the category 'returnee' and reformulate their identity appropriately to their individual case. Therefore, practitioners need to ensure measures of for successful R&R, and indicators to determine proportionate and measured withdrawal of interventions and support, are gender-appropriate.

## Conclusion

SPRR for women (and their children) returning from Iraq and Syria must be long-term, proportionate and needs-based. SPRR should address the gendered experiences of

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<sup>56</sup> Brown, K.E. (2019) Gender Mainstreaming in PVE; UN Women (forthcoming) *Policy Report*.

<sup>57</sup> Ní Aoláin and Huckerby. 2018. Gendering Counterterrorism (Parts 1 and 2); Pearson, Winterbotham and Brown (2021) Countering Violent Extremism.

radicalisation and affiliation; be sensitive to the gender specific needs of women returning from a holistic and long-term R&R perspective; and connect SPRR to broader P/CVE efforts. Failure to do so will result in ambiguous outcomes and uncertainty for professionals, policymakers and the women returning. Screening and prosecution have been linked to repatriation and focus on security threat assessments, the impact of these R&R stages need to be considered carefully. To date, rehabilitation of women (and their children) have focused on addressing psychological trauma associated with their time in Iraq and Syria, while reintegration efforts currently focus on establishing basic needs (housing, identity, income). The priority has been on addressing extremist behaviours. The next step is to address modes of belonging and belief that make women vulnerable to extremism. In cases where the level of affiliation was low and coercion (in some form) is identified, supporting new forms of belonging and belief will also be needed. Gender is an essential part of returnees experiences and shapes their long-term needs. As such, gender-sensitive approaches are required.

## Further reading

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