

INVISIBLE WOMEN



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings and Programming Guidance on the Gendered Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism

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Front cover images (clockwise from top): A Bring Back Our Girls campaigner during a protest in Lagos, Nigeria (REUTERS/Akintunde Akinleye - stock.adobe.com); Yazidi woman and children outside her tent in Kanke refugee camp, Iraq (answer5/Shutterstock.com); Young woman practices embroidery in northeast Nigeria © European Union 2018 (Samuel Ochai); German woman at right-wing protest in Berlin, Germany (Paul Velasco/Shutterstock.com); View of war damage from Serekaniye, Syria (fpolat69/Shutterstock.com).

Back cover images (clockwise from top left): Woman holding her face in her hands; Pakistani women shelter under truck after flood (Hira Hashmey/UNDP Photo); Syrian women protest in the refugee camp of Idomeni, at the Greek border (Giannis Papanikos/Shutterstock.com).

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Key Findings and Programming Guidance from the Report

2019

The full report including 7 chapters of sector-specific analysis and 7 examples of good practice can be accessed through UNDP's online publications library at undp.org and ICAN's website at icanpeacework.org.

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The report shows that women and girls are associated with violent extremism in complex and diverse ways. For disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes to be effective, the counter-terrorism and PVE community must recognize their existence and adapt existing policies and practices to be gender-responsive for both men and women.

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As 2019 dawns, the spectre of violent extremism remains at the forefront of the global peace and security discourse and practice. As the number of deaths due to terrorism continues to fall, decreasing by 27 percent from 2016 to 2017, a new set of challenges emerges: that of the disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration of men, women, boys and girls associated with violent extremist (VE) groups.¹ Meanwhile, with some 67 countries recording at least one death from terrorism in 2017, terrorism and violent extremism continue to be global issues demanding international coordination, policy and legal approaches.²

Often invisible in the eyes of international policy and law are the women and children associated with violent extremist groups. Reports have indicated that in northern Syria, Kurdish authorities are holding some 2,000 foreign women and children who were associated with ISIL.³ In Northern Nigeria, thousands of women and girls associated with Boko Haram—some who joined voluntarily, others who were among those abducted—are housed in military camps for the displaced, at risk of sexual abuse and stigmatized by the communities from which they originally came.⁴ Meanwhile in Kenya, Indonesia, Lebanon, Tunisia, across Western Europe and beyond, men and women affiliated with internationally designated terror organizations or other violent extremist (VE) groups seek to cross international borders as they attempt to return home, in some cases with children in tow.⁵

The joint United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) publication, *Invisible Women: Gendered Dimensions of Return, Reintegration and Rehabilitation*, is an effort to map the gaps and challenges pertaining to the reintegration and rehabilitation of women and girls associated with violent extremist groups, and establish a preliminary evidence-base of good practices and approaches. The report and its methodology centralize the experiences of local civil society, in particular women-led civil society organizations (CSOs) who contributed to the report through interviews, dialogues, and case study profiles. The research emphasizes the necessity of integrated, multi-stakeholder approaches that enable state and civil society to work in tandem, based on the comparative advantages of each.

In every context, the research finds, gender dynamics play a critical role. Returning women and girls who are victims of sexual violence face additional stigma from their communities and have distinct psychosocial and health needs. Returning women suffer economic consequences, too: The widows of men who joined the ranks of Daesh in Iraq or Syria have assumed the burden of heading households, needing to earn incomes while singlehandedly caring for their children.⁶ The absence of coherent, gender-sensitive policies may carry mortal implications, such as in Iraq, where the foreign widows of former Daesh fighters may face the death penalty regardless of their role in the movements.⁷ The status of many children and orphans remains unknown.⁸ Research shows that in Nigeria and elsewhere, if women return to their communities and face the lack of opportunity alongside the stigma of being affiliated with violent extremists, the risk of re-radicalization and re-recruitment increases.⁹

¹ The Institute for Economics and Peace. (2018), *Global Terrorism Index 2018: measuring and understanding the impact of terrorism* (available at: <http://globalterrorismindex.org/>).

² Ibid.

³ Ben Hubbard (2018), *Wives and Children of ISIS: Warehoused in Syria, Unwanted Back Home* (available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/04/world/middleeast/islamic-state-families-syria.html>).

⁴ UNICEF, 2016, In Nigeria's restive northeast, fate of thousands of abducted women remains unknown (available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/04/526752-nigerias-restive-northeast-fate-thousands-abducted-women-remains-unknown-un> and <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/more-1000-children-northeastern-nigeria-abducted-boko-haram-2013>).

⁵ European Parliament (2018), *The Return of Foreign Fighters to EU Soil: Ex-Post Evaluation*, (available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/621811/EPRS_STU\(2018\)621811_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/621811/EPRS_STU(2018)621811_EN.pdf)).

⁶ Mujahid Abu al-Joud (2018, February 21), "Wives of 'muhajirin': who's your husband?". Open Democracy.

⁷ Mina Aldroubi, M. (2018, February 9), "Iraq sentences Turkish ISIL widow to death Court also issued life imprisonment to 10 women guilty of participating in acts of terror." *The National*, pp. 1–17.

⁸ Trew, B. (2018, September 25). *What becomes of the jihadi orphans?*. *The Independent* (available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long-reads/isis-children-orphans-islamic-state-jihadis-mosul-zahour-a8550276.html>).

⁹ UNICEF, & International Alert. (2016), "Bad blood": Perceptions of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria.

The report finds that there is still a lack of coherent national and international policies pertaining to the treatment of those returning from transnational violent extremist and terrorist groups.¹⁰ Where the fate of women and children is concerned, there is an even wider chasm between on-the-ground realities and global policies. For years, women and children have been nearly absent from the literature on foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) as much of the information gathering and scholarship has lacked a gendered analysis.¹¹ The question of returning women and children brings additional challenges. For instance, determining whether they joined voluntarily or were forced to join, and the extent to which they perpetrated violence or acted as supporters and enablers.



Figure 1: Terminology referring to return, rehabilitation and reintegration varies widely

The absence of coherence in international policy is reflected in the lack of agreed terminology and priorities among the policy, academic and practitioner communities active in the fields of counter-terrorism, countering or preventing violent extremism (PVE) and peacebuilding. For some, the process is primarily legal and judicial and thus is framed as prosecution, sentencing, reintegration and rehabilitation (PRR).¹² For practitioners with experience from past demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) processes, the issues are better framed as disengagement from the group; rehabilitation of the individual, family and community; and reintegration into society. Meanwhile, front-line practitioners often point to the importance of deradicalization from the ideology of the movements as a key component in the process.¹³

The research makes clear that as the policy debates continue in the global arena, in communities across the world, the lives of ordinary people are in the balance. While many states and international entities continue to approach

the issue of violent extremism, FTF and reintegration in a gender-blind manner, CSOs, particularly those rooted locally and led by women, have been the first to see and respond to the issues facing women who are associated with VE groups. From Indonesia to Nigeria, Pakistan to the Philippines, at the national and community levels, women-led CSOs are forging new practices and approaches to enable the safe and effective reintegration of women and girls into society. Although cultural and political contexts vary, the initiatives that CSOs have developed have similar holistic approaches tailored to the conditions of the people implicated.

The expertise of women-led CSOs is essential for ensuring national legislation and policies are effective and address the unique needs of women and girls in disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration programmes. The importance of their participation in rehabilitation and reintegration processes, and in PVE more broadly, has been reiterated across global policy frameworks. For example, the Madrid Guiding Principles on stemming the flow of foreign terrorist fighters clearly articulate the importance of working with civil society.¹⁴ The UN Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism and UN Security Council Resolution 2242 also emphasize the need for partnership with women-led CSOs in efforts to prevent violent extremism.¹⁵ However, the report finds that the

¹⁰ Shephard, M. (2018, February), At least two Canadian women are among 800 foreign 'ISIS families' being held in legal limbo by Kurdish forces. The Toronto Star.

¹¹ Vidino, L. (2014, March). Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Responses in Eleven Countries. Center for Security Studies (CSS) ETH Zurich: 19; The Gendering of Counter-Terrorism. (2011). University of Oslo.

¹² UN Security Council. FACT SHEET: Resolution 2396 (2017) on Foreign Terrorist Fighters (Returnees and Relocators).

¹³ Holmes, G., & Shtuni, A. (2010), Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative. USIP Special Report. Stern, J. (2010). Deradicalization or Disengagement? Future Challenges in National Security and Law, II(4), 20.

¹⁴ S/2015/939 (2015), Madrid Guiding Principles (available at: https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Madrid-Guiding-Principles_EN.pdf).

¹⁵ A/70/674 (2015), Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General; S/RES/2242 (2015) (available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2242.pdf).

perception among CSOs is that in the majority of cases these principles have not been translated into national policies, laws or practices. Instead of being seen as allies and contributors to the resolution of this complex challenge, CSOs experience a closing of civic space and face heightened financial, reputational and operational risk.¹⁶

Public attitudes, stigma and fear emerged in the research as central challenges to be considered in reintegration and rehabilitation efforts. In both domestic and international settings, return of women, girls, boys and men associated with VE groups is frequently paired with heightened levels of fear, anger and mistrust from communities. States are grappling with a difficult dilemma: On the one hand, they are responsible for protecting their citizens from the potential risk of violence and seeking justice for the victims of terror, while on the other they must guarantee effective due process and adherence to human rights laws, including the protection of the rights of children. To make matters more complicated, governments and international institutions also have to ensure that members of local communities do not perceive that returnees and those associated with VE groups are receiving preferential treatment or services. In other words, programming for the reintegration of women and children associated with VE groups must be anchored, owned and beneficial to the wider community. Striking the right balance is extraordinarily complex and challenging but must be thoroughly considered in the design of reintegration and rehabilitation processes, law and policies.

The research underscores the need for a holistic, gender-sensitive approach to reintegration and rehabilitation that addresses not only those returning, but also the stigma, threats and vulnerabilities experienced by family and community members associated with violent extremism. The report critically analyses existing policy frameworks and legal processes and presents a preliminary mapping of key elements of a holistic approach to reintegration, including security, public awareness, ideological, psychosocial and economic components.

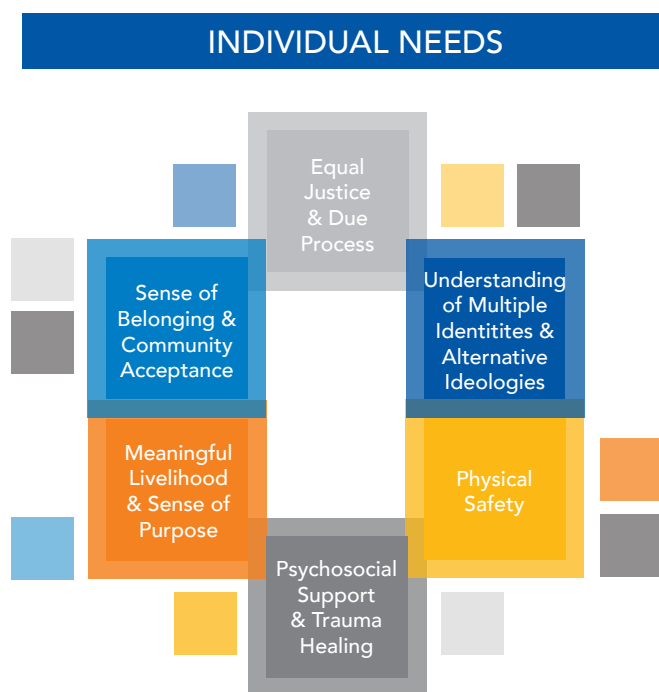


Figure 2: Individuals returning from association with VE groups have multiple and interrelated needs

Figure 3: Effective national policy for rehabilitation and reintegration should be holistic and engage all sectors of society

¹⁶ Duke Law, Tightening the Purse Strings: What Countering Terrorism Financing Costs Gender Equality and Security (available at: <https://law.duke.edu/sites/default/files/humanrights/tighteningpursestrings.pdf>)

KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Most countries do not have consistent policies or laws pertaining to the treatment of returnees associated with terrorist and VE groups. This is particularly true in the case of women, girls and boys associated with such groups. As a result, programmes for their rehabilitation and reintegration are inconsistent, which leaves them prone to abuse by state and community actors and increases their vulnerability to re-radicalization and re-recruitment. Rhetoric demanding harsh punishment for returnees has gained traction, but these demands may contravene rule of law, exacerbate stigma, and serve as a grievance fomenting future cycles of radicalization to violence.
- 2 Current policies and programming tend to either ignore women and girls associated with VE groups or oversimplify the issues. They frame women and girls in binary terms, either as victims or perpetrators of violence. Yet in most instances, women's and girls' association with VE groups is complex. It can be due to a mix of factors including coercion, co-option, enslavement or kidnapping, or subjugation in their own communities and unfulfilled aspirations for belonging, purpose, adventure and empowerment. In order to design effective responses for this cohort, we must understand and address the initial drivers, conditions and motivations of their association with VE groups. It is also imperative that state responses do not perpetuate or contribute to further victimization of those who have already experienced profound violence and trauma.
- 3 In drawing attention to women, it is essential that women and children who have been victims of the violence perpetrated by VE groups are not forgotten. There are widows and female-headed households on all sides. They are often becoming breadwinners for the first time because their husbands and sons are either incarcerated or killed. Enabling them to have independent livelihoods can help them heal from trauma and restore their identities, providing them and their children with the resilience that is essential for preventing re-recruitment. If rehabilitation support is only provided to the families of former fighters, then it can fuel injustice, anger and retribution among women and other community members who were innocent targets but have received

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