

## RAN REHABILITATION

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### CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN REHABILITATION working group meeting

14-15 March 2024, Zagreb, Croatia

# Rehabilitation for female VETOs and the role of masculinity in DDR

## Key outcomes

The complex and diverse nature of gender roles within violent extremism has significant implications for rehabilitation efforts, particularly for disengagement, deradicalisation, and reintegration (DDR) of violent extremist and terrorist offenders (VETOs). The primary goal of this RAN REHABILITATION working group meeting was to assess the extent to which rehabilitation practices have become more gender-specific in recent years, how this has been achieved, and what gaps remain. The meeting focused on addressing the specific rehabilitation needs of men and women separately and comparatively, while also considering gender perspectives in society more broadly.

The field of P/CVE has come a long way from exoticising violence perpetrated by women to increasingly recognising the multifaceted nature of women's involvement in extremism. However, the primary perception of women as victims seems to persist and needs to be challenged. Addressing the multiple roles in extremist environments through deradicalisation programmes was seen as essential, particularly given the challenges of prosecuting women with limited direct involvement in terrorism. The motivations that drive men to join extremist groups were also extensively discussed. Masculinity is an invisible social norm and a source of identity. Feelings of alienation and anxiety among working-class and, increasingly, middle-class men were highlighted as major factors in the rise of both populist and extremist groups, including uninhibited misogyny and hostility towards women among a small but growing section of society. Stereotypes and biases affecting men's and women's experiences in rehabilitation were explored, along with the resulting challenges of providing adequate support and the need to understand (gendered) trauma within rehabilitation settings.

The meeting concluded with the formulation of concrete recommendations and guidelines aimed at improving the gender-specificity of rehabilitation practices. The following key insights and challenges were identified:

- Concepts of **victimhood and perpetration** need to be reflected upon and reconsidered in relation to both femininity and masculinity in order to provide tailor-made rehabilitation approaches.
- **Parenthood can be key** to working with both female *and* male clients. Assuming a stronger relationship between mothers and their children as opposed to fathers and their children can reproduce limiting gender roles in rehabilitation.

- **A better understanding of the different forms of masculinity available for appropriation** helps narrow down the elements that are harmful both to individuals and society.
- **Addressing emotions**, particularly anger, in rehabilitation programmes is crucial, as it is often a secondary emotion that signals deeper issues.

## Discussion highlights

This paper compares the specific needs of *male* and *female* clients to highlight gendered experiences and perceptions in rehabilitation. It aims to avoid reproducing a binary understanding of gender that does not reflect the reality of gender expression in society by challenging the gender roles and practices applied in DDR efforts.

### Changing perspectives on society and P/CVE

- P/CVE rehabilitation programmes need to be reflected in the broader political and social systems in which they take place. Assumptions and biases about gender that are prevalent in society need to be critically challenged in DDR practice. As rehabilitation aims to help people return to “normality”, it is necessary to consider how gender roles are currently incorporated. Especially since the Me-Too movement, norms on what is acceptable have changed.
- There was a discussion about how misogyny in wider society can explain misogyny in VE extremism. Should anti-feminism be understood as a distinct form of violent extremism or rather as an important common denominator across the ideological spectrum? As part of this debate, the usefulness of intimate partner violence as an indicator for radicalisation was critically examined and questioned, given its widespread prevalence.
- Practitioners pointed out how perspectives on *gender* and *security* often clash, because they are framed in opposition to each other, as soft vs hard policies.
- It was agreed that the clients’ gender should not be considered as an identity marker in isolation but *in intersectionality*, i.e. in conjunction with other identity markers, such as class, religion or ethnicity. Through more specific analysis, practitioners can offer a tailored, demand-based approach, and experts can learn more about radicalisation and reintegration processes.
- This includes reflecting on *whiteness* in the field of P/CVE, both in terms of how *whiteness* can influence the position from which practitioners seek to support clients, and how it relates to gendered assumptions, where clients may be “othered” due to the intersection of ascribed religious, ethnic, or cultural markers with gender.
- We do not have the full picture as regards the link between gender and *composite extremism* yet. Certain patterns emerge that are traditional and comparable to IE and VRWE, as well as to certain conservative parts of society. Moreover, there are groups that are completely opposite and have gender-fluid views.

### Constructive masculinities

The term “toxic masculinity” is open to different interpretations. Is all masculinity negative? Is there such a thing as “healthy” masculinity, and, if so, what does it look like? These questions are important to address when working in DDR. Like most extremist ideologies, DDR has strong and clear gender roles and it glorifies masculinity. This is also part of the attraction to extremism.

For example, in RWE we see the narrative that in current society men can no longer act as men and they are forced into adopting “female behaviour”. What the extremist group suggests is that men can be real men again. This is often accompanied by toxic aspects, such as stereotyping, extreme traditionalist view, aggression, and dominance.

Categorising others and basing one's behaviour on what is considered masculine makes masculinity toxic. When working on rehabilitation, it is good to emphasise that there are alternatives and that there is healthy masculinity. It is different from being feminine or gender-neutral and it is respectful to other gender roles. In other words: healthy masculinity does not proclaim a hierarchy of genders.

In extremist ideologies masculinity is called upon to stand up for the family, the community (the "umma") or the nation, which are threatened by the negative influence of others (for example, non-religious, different ethnic background). So, the goal is defence. A social construction of what a man should do in this situation is proposed. In propaganda, the path from "zero to hero" is depicted, where (toxic) masculinity is the key to success. Traditionally, the receptive audiences for these narratives have been lower socio-economic strata and/or individuals with a troubled past. However, in the last decade such narratives have started to attract more of the middle class as well.

The response to toxic masculinity in DDR should be constructive. This includes addressing the emotional drivers (such as fear, frustration and mistrust) that have made individuals vulnerable to extremism. Working on these drivers can create cognitive space for other perspectives. Another way may be alternative narratives; not opposing masculinity, but rather finding better ways of "using" it.

### Extremist women

The traditional exoticisation of women's violence and women's role in VE movements has hindered the accuracy of data. Women have often been overlooked and seen only as victims or bystanders. This has led not only to a lower level of prosecution, but also to a lower evaluation of cases. The few cases that were assessed were done so using methods designed for men.

Meanwhile, more cases of women are identified, assessed and included in databases. This offers more information/insights for both preventing and countering radicalisation processes affecting women. The lack of information made it more difficult for women to receive assistance in leaving violent movements. As it stands, in general, women are detected later in the radicalisation process.

Some challenges remain regarding the rehabilitation of extremist women. Parenthood is still often seen as a women's issue. Extremist women are sometimes seen as bad mothers (but their partners are not bad fathers), sometimes prosecution is milder because of parental duties and sometimes it is claimed that children are a positive driver for women to work on rehabilitation. Reducing women to the role of mother, which is a generalisation, can hinder the rehabilitation process. More research is needed on what works best for extremist women who are mothers, where rehabilitation is concerned.

This is a challenge for all formerly radicalised individuals. However, women may face an additional complication, as traditional roles may be putting limitations to a new beginning in life.

## Recommendations for gender-specific rehabilitation

- Reflect on how dynamic social norms about gender and gender roles impact the rehabilitation for both yourself as a practitioner and the participants in the programmes. Protocols on gender-specific rehabilitation will only work if your staff is adequately trained. It is important to explain why this is important and to allow time for conversations. Explain what privileges you have and who is not in the same position as you. Repeat the message over and over.

- Customising methods for gender-based assessment can be helpful, as in some ideologies, gender roles are very specific and one needs to take this into account. For example, some assessment methods are weighing financial transactions as a risk factor, while in some traditional environments this is only allowed for men.
- Customising interventions according to gender is only useful if there is an obvious situation or a clear need. It should not be based on the biases and stereotypes embedded in the minds of the practitioners implementing rehabilitation practices.
- Learn to recognise the intersectionality of gender dynamics within VE contexts. Not all behaviours can be reduced to this. And even if a dynamic seems to be gendered, it is good to see if there are any other determining factors (e.g. age, ideology or education).
- Reconsider notions of victimhood and perpetration concerning gender by differentiating masculinities and understanding the role of emotions in extremist behaviour.
- Consider gendered risks such as suicide, which is higher for women after release.
- Offer vocational training that goes beyond traditional gender stereotypes. In prisons and in some rehabilitation programmes the offer for women is limited to beauty and care.

## Relevant practices

1. **Fryshuset theatre** is a Swedish national touring youth theatre that focuses on contemporary social issues, marginalised communities, and the harmful effects of exclusion. Its practice is based on true stories.
2. **L'Observatori Català de Justícia en Violència Masclista** is a forum for analysis and reflection on gender-based violence in Catalonia. It is affiliated with the Centre for Legal Studies and Specialized Training of the Department of Justice, Rights, and Memory.
3. **Counselling Line for Men and Boys (CLMB)** is the first programme dealing with perpetrators of domestic violence in Albania.

## Further reading

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RAN Small-scale expert meeting (14 November 2023, online). [The missing gender-dimension in risk assessment](#).

RAN Paper (September 2022). [Gender-specificity in practical P/CVE: Reviewing RAN Practitioners' activities in 2021](#).

RAN PRISONS (5-6 April 2022, online). [The role of multi-agency cooperation in dealing with female returnees in prison and protecting the rights of children with imprisoned parents](#).

RAN EXIT (22-23 October 2019, Rome). [Gender-specific approaches in exit work](#).

Joshua M. Roose & Joana Cook (2022). Supreme Men, Subjected Women: Gender Inequality and Violence in Jihadist, Far Right and Male Supremacist Ideologies, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2022.2104681.