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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN PRISONS Working Group Meeting

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

Key outcomes

While the number of women returning or repatriated from terrorist organisations and conflict zones to the European Union (EU) has grown in recent years, the related prosecution and conviction rates are still low. However, practitioners are gradually improving their understanding of the various roles women have played (for instance, in the former Daesh-affiliated territories): it has become clear that women were not only victims but also perpetrators and bystanders – and were often a combination of all three.

Practitioners have highlighted a pressing need for targeted gender-sensitive management and treatment approaches for such women detained or imprisoned upon return, especially when children are involved. The RAN PRISONS Working Group meeting was a space for practitioners from across the EU to analyse the needs and challenges involved in supporting female returnees in prison and ensuring the best interest of children with imprisoned parents. Lessons learned and good practices in multi-agency cooperation to that end were central to the discussion.

The following key outcomes were noted.

- **No single or universal solution exists for children with imprisoned parents.** An individualised approach to each and every case is paramount, as each situation is unique. Practitioners should remain unprejudiced when working with imprisoned female returnees and take care not to conflate these women's experiences and those of other target groups.
- **Parent-child relationships should not be instrumentalised** for leverage to obtain compliance from parents or extract information from children about their parents. More nuanced and systematic assessment of parental skills and parent-child relationships is essential in order to determine whether to separate mothers from their children.
- **Mental health and trauma treatment** should be more systematically integrated into rehabilitation work with female returnees in prison. Potential re-traumatisation resulting from mother-child separation should be considered, as should delayed, long-term trauma effects. When children display inconspicuous behaviour,

it does not mean they are not traumatised; however, this may result in them being overlooked by youth workers.

- More nuanced approaches are required to **foster and safeguard mother-child relationships**. Broader structural challenges need to be addressed in terms of providing personnel and child-friendly facilities to ensure regular contact or accommodation of women with children in prison settings. Alternative custody facilities should be considered to allow joint accommodation or regular contact, but also to protect children from exposure to harmful prison environments.
- The mother-child relationship should also be **addressed more systematically in rehabilitation and disengagement work**, as it is an important motivational factor for imprisoned females. A key aspect here is provision of support to improve parenting styles and repair attachment bonds.
- Multi-agency cooperation should be strengthened in terms of ensuring **more systematic exchanges between disengagement practitioners and child welfare workers**.

Discussion highlights

Practitioners' experiences shared from different Member States showcased different ways of integrating female returnees into prisons across the EU. Female violent extremist or terrorist offenders (VETOs) are often placed in the same detention wards as other VETOs or the general female prison population and undergo the same treatment (and rehabilitation programmes).

In some Member States such as France, women VETOs are placed in separate units for female detainees who undergo specific multi-professional evaluation. A hybrid approach is also practiced in some Member States: in Italy, for instance, the women are placed in special units during initial assessment and later in ordinary detention with other female offenders. Individualised and needs-based care is provided in many contexts, but progress is needed in the nascent gender-sensitive risk assessment tools and rehabilitation programmes.

Age limits of children permitted to stay with imprisoned mothers vary not only across the EU but also within countries. The permitted level of contact between children and their imprisoned parents varies depending on legal frameworks, but also by availability of personnel and facilities. In most cases, returnee women placed in custody are separated from their children upon arrival, based on a court order. This may be to allow initial assessment of the child's needs or in response to concerns about their welfare, but in many instances it is also due to ongoing investigations and evaluations of the women.

Supporting female returnees in prison

- Approaches to the criminal prosecution of female returnees differ widely across the EU. Overall, the number of imprisoned female returnees is still low. (There are only 6 female returnees in prison in Belgium, while 20 have been convicted in Germany to date. There were around 72 women in custody in France in 2021.)
- Consequently, there is sparse experience in supporting radicalised female inmates, and related expertise is just starting to be developed. **Targeted scaling of resources and training** is needed to respond to the challenges and needs of such a small target group.
- In practice, detained female returnees undergo **the same risk assessment as men** and are often placed under the same prison regime as other female offenders. There is growing awareness of the gap in gender-sensitive risk assessment tools and some efforts have been made to fill this gap.
- In some Member States like France and the Netherlands, **female VETOs** are placed in **separate units**. In France, there is a radicalisation evaluation unit (quartiers d'évaluation de la radicalisation (QER)) exclusively

for women in prison, where a **gender-sensitive assessment and detection grid** has been created and is applied based on experiences with female VETOs. Although procedures in this unit are similar to those for men, the factors addressed are also specifically relevant to the radicalisation of women: they include maternity, sexual violence and trauma.

- There is still a **say-do gap regarding gender-sensitive approaches in prison**, as the field is so accustomed to dealing with men: the overall assumption is that what works for men will work the same way for women. There needs to be a thorough reflection of this gender-neutral approach and its inherent biases, as well as systematic training of prison staff and the wider community of relevant stakeholders.
 - To bridge this gap, it is important to **gather data in a gender-disaggregated and age-sensitive way**.
 - **Beliefs, behaviours and belonging** need to be addressed in work with imprisoned female returnees, in order to reduce the risk of recidivism.¹ These are **gendered factors**: for example, when working with female VETOs, belonging needs to be considered, as well as how family may not necessarily be a protective factor in the same way it is for men. In many cases, families either continue to support jihadi networks or reject women due to fear of state intervention or shame being brought on the community.
 - **An ethno-psychological approach to the risk and needs assessment** of returned women is necessary to understand their culture, family attachments, immigrant background and the kind of pressure they might be under to conform with family and community. Understand what the women views as her ideal expression of a women. Women have different reasons for joining Daesh: they might be seeking a means of escape from or rejection of family, pressure from 'the West' or traditional gender roles, or might be attracted to a hyper-gendered society.
 - It is important to consider **these women's attitudes vis-à-vis the so-called caliphate after their return**. Some remain highly committed despite feeling disappointment in how it has been ruled by Daesh in recent years (i.e. not a religious disillusionment).
- Women returnees might **not show the conventional signs of trauma**: a delayed, long-term impact is seen when women 'hold off' their needs upon return. This can lead to dysfunctional stress processing. In addition, separation might cause re-traumatisation for both parent and child, which can foster radicalisation instead of mitigating it. When children display inconspicuous behaviour, it does not mean they are not traumatised; however, this may result in them being overlooked by youth workers.
- **Mental health support** needs to be more systematically incorporated into rehabilitation work, and case workers should have more regular access to and exchanges with mental health professionals.
- **The role of motherhood** as a presumed positive aspect of identity should not be taken for granted. It is a central part of disengagement for women, but the way women construct motherhood needs to be considered carefully and discussed with them, without the assumption that mothers will necessarily always make better decisions for their children. For instance, for them, taking their child to the so-called caliphate might have been a good decision, which can trigger shame. There are many different and complex situations to be considered in the context of motherhood: these include traumatic births in conflict zones and the nature of relationships to (sometimes multiple) husbands.
- Female returnees can **access other social groups through their children** (who attend school and socialise with other groups), an experience that men do not share in the same immediate way. Exit workers or religious counsellors can better connect with female returnees at this level, even if they remain ideologically committed, because **providing for their children often dominates other factors**.
- Consider women's **experiences, skills and interests prior to and after their time in conflict zones** – and how these align with the skills they need for resocialisation. Many programmes are based on stereotypical gender roles of women as caregivers, offering employment that might not be in line with their

¹ Brown, [Gender-sensitive responses to returnees from foreign terrorist organisations: insights for practitioners](#).

interests and skillsets. Involving women in the preparation of their own exit plan can increase their commitment.

- Prison staff continue to treat women primarily as victims. It remains difficult to strike a **balance between security considerations/assessment and addressing trauma**, but it is important to recognise that women also acted as bystanders and perpetrators. An intersection of different roles is also likely to have occurred.
- Women might change prisons for security or due to a change in the risk and needs assessment. As far as possible, it is important to **build on the existing knowledge of professionals who worked with the inmate previously** and not to start the entire assessment over from scratch. This requires better coordination across different prisons and professionals.
 - In Germany, for example, civil society organisation (CSO) disengagement work with returned women is not standardised and prisons have very different practices. Exit workers who were in contact with these women while in the camp may not be allowed to continue working with them due to the prison having a different disengagement partner.
- Different professionals (prison staff, social workers and psychologists) have their own priorities, perspectives and tools for these new populations. New tools are needed to help practitioners conceptualise these situations. It is important they do **not conflate these situations and those they are already familiar with** but instead acknowledge that each case is distinct and requires an individualised approach and understanding of the unique history and experiences of the inmate prior to, during and after her time in the conflict zone.
- The issue of management of returning women has highlighted **the broader structural problems** of the prison system regarding support for imprisoned mothers in general. Resources (and attention) are allocated to the most severe cases (such as high-risk extremist offenders), but many other cases slip through the net.
- Multi-agency cooperation for **information-sharing and handover from prison to probation after release** should be strengthened and joint risk management plans developed. Practitioners report that this occurs only in highly security-relevant cases, while others receive much less attention.

Managing the relationship between imprisoned parents and their children: the role of motherhood

- In most cases, **children are separated from their mothers** upon return (due to child welfare concerns, the mother's incarceration in a high-security prison or a lack of appropriate facilities in the prison). Detained female returnees rarely seem to qualify for placement in the sparse maternity wards with their children.
 - In Germany, returning women can in principle express their preference for the family members their children will be placed with. German authorities are reluctant to separate children from their mothers, but in practice, courts often rule in favour of separation since the prison environment is not considered beneficial for children or there are security/ideological considerations.
- It is important **not to instrumentalise children** in any way. While practitioners have noted that the child's well-being is a motivating factor for mothers to disengage, this situation should not be abused or leveraged to achieve compliance from parents. Likewise, children should not be instrumentalised to extract information about their parents, something children were frequently asked to do in conflict zones.
- Ensuring **regular contact between imprisoned mothers and their children is challenging**, as the children are often fostered by extended families living at a distance. In addition, visits are limited in most prisons, while some mothers have several children. In general, the court mandates how much contact is allowed. Youth welfare services then work with the prison administration to facilitate this contact.
- A combination **of in-person and virtual visits** has been set up in some Member States. Belgium, for example, has in place **an adapted, child-friendly setting** for children's visits to prison, that is less traumatising.

- A recent approach used previously in other situations (e.g. domestic violence) is **attachment parenting interventions** with imprisoned female returnees and their children: the aim is to repair the relationship and guide the parent towards recognising and responding to their child's needs and improving their parenting skills. It can play an important role in the mother's rehabilitation and reunification with the child, after release.
- There is a **shortage of Muslim foster families and adopting families** due to Sunni Islam prohibition. This might pose additional challenges for the reintegration of children placed in secular families. Foster and extended families in general that host returnee children also face many and complex challenges (including trauma).
- Some **mothers face deportation upon release from prison**. This poses a dilemma as regards the children's best interest: to reunite them with the mother, meaning they move with her to her country of origin (that is foreign to them); or to place them in stable homes with a good education, but without the mother.
- In terms of **multi-agency cooperation**, child welfare practitioners cooperate with prisons to facilitate children's visits in prison, but have less contact with the professionals working with mothers in prison (e.g. exit workers or those carrying out ideological and risk assessments). They can gain access to certain kinds of information only after the trial.
 - In the Netherlands, cases of returned children with imprisoned parents are discussed during Safety House conversations, but also by the national expert team on returnee children, mental health, and probation. Psychologists support and reunite women and children when they exit prison.

Recommendations

- As more knowledge on the target group is being gathered across Member States, it is important to bear in mind that an individualised approach to each and every case of parenthood in the prison context is required, as each situation is unique.
- More nuanced and systematic assessment of motherhood and the parent-child relationship is needed to support decisions on whether to separate mothers from their children and on the role motherhood is likely to play in rehabilitation and disengagement efforts. The potential of the parents to take good care of their children should also be considered carefully. Provide support for parents to improve parenting styles and repair attachment bonds, in order to increase the likelihood of successful reunification after release.
- In multi-professional/multi-agency case conferences, when discussing female VETOs and their rehabilitation, also consider management of the parent-child relationship and receive more input from child welfare practitioners working with their children, and vice versa. Interlinking rehabilitation work for returnee females in prison with the child welfare aspect can offer mutual benefits.
- Likewise, mental health and trauma treatment should be more systematically integrated into the prison context and rehabilitation work.
- In this context, it is important to recognise that women played various roles in the conflict zones. While it is very likely that they will have fallen victim to some form of abuse, at the same time they might have been bystanders and perpetrators. Some continue to be ideologically committed, while others have become strongly disillusioned.
- Gender-sensitive risk assessment tools need to be developed further. Any data put together for the purpose of adjusting existing tools should be gathered in a gender-disaggregated and age-sensitive way. If a tool, approach or measure is considered *aaato* and after their time in the conflict zone should be considered, and stereotypical gendered employment options such as caregiving reconsidered.

- Consider alternative custodial facilities where the mother-child relationship and contact can be further fostered, while at the same time children are protected from exposure to harmful prison environments. This requires structural factors and shortages in prison settings to be addressed.

Relevant practices

1. The [NIKA method](#) is an attachment-based parenting intervention developed by the Dutch Child Protection Board. Its overall goal is to strengthen the parent-child relationship by way of helping parents reflect on their child's needs, in order to prevent or reduce attachment issues between the two parties. By way of video feedback, psycho-education and take-home assignments, the method trains parents of children aged from 9 months to 6 years to disrupt harmful patterns in their parenting approach and develop a more sensitive parenting style.
2. In France, there is a radicalisation evaluation unit (QER) in prison exclusively for women, where a gender-sensitive assessment and detection grid is applied, based on experiences with female VETOs.
3. Practices and approaches exist for keeping detained mothers and children together: for example, in Italy, the Attenuated Custodial Institutions for Mothers (ICAM) and safe homes for detained mothers with children outside the prison setting are authorised by the Ministry of Justice. In Belgium, regular phone or video contact is ensured, including physical visits in child-friendly facilities.

Follow-up

Topics for further exploration at RAN Practitioners meetings include:

- improving the availability of national and EU-wide data on returned and imprisoned female returnees (with or without children), as well as on women waiting to be repatriated;
- more tailored guidance on defining how gender-sensitive risk assessment approaches and programmes function in practice;
- exploring challenges and opportunities for placement of female VETOs in maternity wards and/or ensuring regular contact with children where it is deemed beneficial;
- facilitating closer exchanges between disengagement professionals working with imprisoned female returnees and youth/child welfare practitioners working with their children.

Further reading

Brown, K. E., & Mohammed, F. N. (2021). [*Gender-sensitive approaches to FTF child returnee management*](#). International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

Koller, S. (2021). [*Women and minors in tertiary prevention of Islamist extremism*](#). German Council on Foreign Relations.

Koller, S., & Schiele, A. (2021). [*Holding women accountable: prosecuting female returnees in Germany*](#). Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

Brown, K. E. (2021). [*Gender-sensitive responses to returnees from foreign terrorist organisations: insights for practitioners*](#). Radicalisation Awareness Network.