

RAN small-scale meeting

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CONCLUSION PAPER*Small-scale expert meeting**9 November 2023, Rome, Italy*

Management of women violent extremist and terrorist offenders in prison

Key outcomes

An increasing number of women violent extremist and terrorist offenders (VETOs) have entered the prison system in recent years. This is a result of various factors, including a growing trend when it comes to women's engagement in terrorist and other violent extremist background activities as well as a growing number of women returning or repatriated from conflict zones to the European Union (EU).

Although women VETOs are often subject to the same measures and/or programmes designed for men VETOs, special considerations and tailor-made measures should be developed and adopted for the management of women VETOs. These should include gender-specific requirements and consider the multiple roles women might have played on their journey into violent extremism. Consideration should be given to the different push and pull factors among women towards violent extremism, which might differ from the ones found among men VETOs.

During this RAN Small-scale experts meeting on the management of women VETOs in prison, held in Rome, Italy, on 9 November 2023, participants shared their expertise related to the management of women VETOs. This meeting aimed to improve knowledge on specific aspects and elements that should be considered by prison personnel and relevant stakeholders, while offering an occasion for practitioners to exchange their experiences and existing good practices.

The following key outcomes summarise the meeting's overarching insights:

- The profile of the women VETOs in prisons in Europe today is that of foreign fighter returnees from Syria and Iraq who were involved with ISIS and who returned voluntarily or were repatriated. Some women were affiliated with other Islamist extremist groups, for example Salafist movements in the Netherlands. In some EU Member State prisons, there is also a small number of right-wing extremist (RWE) women and a few left-wing extremists (LWE).
- The number of women VETOs is comparatively smaller to that of men VETOs. Nevertheless, their number has increased in the past few years so there is a need to re-examine the necessary prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work with this target group.
- Some EU Member States use specific gender-based interventions that take into account the different needs and risks of women VETOs.
- Many of the women VETOs in prisons are victims of abuse (sexual or other) themselves. This trauma affects their actions and requires mental health interventions.

- In many of the cases, a woman's relationship with a man was associated with her radicalisation process and activity. While some women were influenced by their partners' radicalisation processes and involvement in violence, there were also instances of women who involved their partners in extremist activity.

Highlights of the discussion

The discussion focused on the management of women terrorists and violent extremist offenders in prison and involved diverse actors who work with them in identifying the different needs of these clients. Practitioners and researchers' experiences show that, although there are women VETOs in prisons in different Member States, they are often not addressed as a group with different and specific needs and risks. Consequently, there is a lack of tailor-made assessment procedures and deradicalisation, disengagement and rehabilitation interventions. At the same time, experiences in the field have led to the development of some good and promising practices.

Who are the women VETOs in Europe?

The phenomenon of women VETOs is significantly smaller than that of men VETOs, from a few individuals in Italy, Spain or Sweden up to around one hundred in some Member States, such as France. In some countries, such as Belgium, women VETOs represent approximately 10% of the VETO population. Some EU Member States do not have women VETOs housed in their prison facilities for various reasons, including different radicalisation trends and diverse legal frameworks.

Among participants in this meeting, the majority shared experiences with women VETOs affiliated with Islamist extremism, including women who have returned from Syria and Iraq after being involved with ISIS and whose primary involvement was related to recruitment, dissemination of propaganda and training. In some Member States, cases of extreme right or extreme left VETOs are present, although in small numbers. Therefore, the discussion dealt mainly with the first group.

Diverse detention periods for women VETOs are enforced throughout Europe, with an average sentence of 18 months in the Netherlands, 3–4 years in Belgium and 7.5 years in France. Different detention systems are in place, from dispersion to concentration. Finally, diverse sentencing frameworks and release processes can be noted throughout the Member States.

As women VETOs represent a prison population comprised of many individuals, the push and pull factors can vary. However, a few common elements and motivations can be identified in their trajectory to violence:

- **Relationships with men:** Many women travelled to Syria and Iraq with their partners, and sometimes with their children. Some left for love and shared a romanticised vision of the departure to conflict zones. There are also cases of women that left to find love with similar-minded men.
- **Political or religious motivation:** In some cases, women chose to join ISIS or other organisations out of personal political and/or religious conviction.
- **Many of these women are victims themselves:** Many have experienced sexual or domestic violence in their past and some returnees were exposed to abuse while in conflict zones. The personal trauma they experienced may represent one of the push factors behind their participation in terrorist activities.

Common trends and pitfalls in managing women VETOs

There are specific challenges in working with women VETOs. First, there is a lack of specific assessment tools, practices and interventions designed for women. In most EU Member States, the programmes available are ones that were designed for men VETOs, which do not address gender differences and their related implications. One of these differences is motherhood. While fathers also experience difficult separations from their children, the separation of mothers and their children may differ and significantly influence the rehabilitation process. Motherhood may also open the door to a double stigmatisation, connected to the idea of being a 'bad mother'. On the other hand, the prospect of being reunited with their children may represent a catalyst factor for women to participate in DDR programmes.

In some EU Member States, there is a separation regime, following which women VETOs are housed in separate wings. This is the case, for example, in the Netherlands, where VETO prisoners (both men and women) are held separately. In other cases, such as in Belgium, different regimes are applied: while men are held in a separate wing, women are dispersed among other prisoners. The dispersion regime is the most common among EU Member States. However, it implies some risks. Islamist women VETOs, for example, may suffer from double stigmatisation because they are easily identified due to head scarves or other traditional clothing.

Prison staff managing women VETOs generally do not receive specialised training on the specific needs and risks related to this prison population. This could address, for example, the mental health issues often observed among women VETOs: the traumas they may have experienced before joining terrorist organisations or while in conflict zones, as well as other mental health disorders that have been noted, such as attachment issues. In addition, no specific gender dimension is integrated into commonly used risk assessment tools.

Regarding women's roles within a terrorist organisation, it is generally difficult to collect evidence on the extent of their engagement in terrorist activities, especially in relation to support activities. This generates consequences on the sentencing process and also negatively affects the risks and needs assessment as data on the criminal background of the individual are limited. It was also shared that, in some cases, women present a stronger ideological commitment, which can be connected to false compliance. In different Member States, it was observed that women VETOs are particularly successful in feigning compliant behaviour by following prison rules. This can make disengagement efforts more difficult, complex and long.

Due to general social structures, especially in more conservative societies, many women have fewer transferable skills; this makes it difficult for them to find an occupation after their release from prison – a task that is already difficult for many ex-prisoners regardless of their gender or offence.

Preparing and supporting the social reintegration of women VETOs

As discussed in many RAN PRISONS and RAN REHAB working group meetings and events, a multi-agency approach is generally key in the social integration of VETOs, and the discussion in this small-scale meeting emphasised its importance regarding women VETOs. To improve reintegration into the community, a continuation from imprisonment time and post-release is crucial.

An example of such multi-agency work can be found in Catalonia, where the case of a woman violent extremist offender is still in process: practitioners from different agencies have been working together to improve her participation in the different interventions. The work involves representatives from prison, the municipality (a social educator acting as case manager), social services, municipal and Catalan police, and the internal affairs office (for identification papers and permits). Participation in this multi-agency approach was offered to the client, and a remarkable improvement in her rehabilitation process was noted as a result. The detainee is now in her probation period, her behaviour has proved well and the transition from prison to this stage has been a success so far. A

second good example is the Dutch model, where the MAR system is implemented in the Netherlands. In this process, the Safety Houses which will serve as the post-release framework are involved in the multi-agency work from the beginning of the detention period, thus facilitating the transition both for the client and the different agencies involved. Within this framework, attention is paid towards family-based interventions, involving children and also other family members. In particular, the municipality where the detainee will return after release establishes contact with the family to make sure that unhealthy or risk-increasing patterns are identified and addressed. Another good practice shared during the meeting concerns the client's social network: in Austria a meeting is organised for the entire relevant network (including family) prior to the release, to prepare them, raise awareness, prevent stigma and reduce recidivism.

While it is commonly acknowledged that multi-agency involvement is key, it is also important to consider that some clients may be reluctant to engage in any programme, at least at the beginning of their detention period, as they have never experienced being helped or supported before. In addition, it should be noted that, while oftentimes families can play a protective role, they can also become risk factors. For some women, their womanhood might cause difficulties. Due to rigid and conservative family structures, women VETOs can lose their family support, which in turn affects the process of resocialisation opportunities. Rehabilitation and resocialisation of women should, thus, consider the community and culture they are eventually returning to.

Finally, rehabilitation and reintegration work in prison and outside is highly influenced by Western values, whereas a broader and more inclusive perspective on cultural norms and traditions could help to create a fruitful working environment, where content and format can help the client feel accepted.

Recommendations

Participants in this small-scale meeting have discussed recommendations for the management of women VETOs in prison (and beyond) according to their experience. The main recommendations are:

- Work with the families from an early stage as part of the disengagement and resocialisation efforts. It is important to involve them in the process from an early stage, both by assisting them in dealing with the new family situation and in the preparation for release and resocialisation. Maintaining a relationship with children is important and supports the client in compliance and her efforts to go through the processes of disengagement, rehabilitation and resocialisation. The same applies to a partner relationship. However, thorough assessment should be conducted to make sure that the family relationship does not become a risk factor.
- Many (if not all) women VETOs have suffered traumatic experiences, either before and/or during their engagement in violent extremism and terrorism. Psychological treatment should be provided to them throughout the detention period and awareness on recognising signs of mental health issues should be raised among relevant staff.

Cultural awareness is necessary to fully understand the process of radicalisation as well to ensure successful reintegration: the concepts of femininity and masculinity can undertake different forms and meanings so challenging the stereotypical roles assigned to women is key, both from the perspective of

the women VETOs as well as from the standpoint of the professionals working them. Awareness raising and capacity building could also include concrete examples of conversational topics that might facilitate the buy-in and engagement of the beneficiaries as well as methods and attitudes on how to listen and how to ask questions.

Follow up

Women VETOs do not represent a unique and uniform group and their pathways to radicalisation are characterised by diverse push and pull factors. Future meetings, in the form of a webinar, could help raise awareness among different practitioners (within and outside prison) on the special needs and risks related to women VETOs.

Relevant practices

1. The 'Entré programme', developed by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (SPPS) provides an individualised cognitive behavioural therapy treatment. It contributes to removing obstacles to make it easier for the client to disengage and changing criminal and also works on changing the violent behaviour through different tools, such as training in problem-solving skills, self-control/anger management, and cognitive restructuring techniques. Women VETOs can also be involved in the Entré programme.
2. In Austria approximately 6 months before release a social network conference is held involving the social environment of the inmate. The conference foresees different steps (information phase, family phase, final phase) resulting in a plan to be approved by the court.
3. In the Netherlands, the Programme Against Radicalisation and Extremism (PARE) is coordinating the Multi-Agency Approach to Rehabilitation, which involves three main actors: the custodial institution, municipalities and probation. The overall purpose is to develop an individualised resocialisation plan for detainees who are linked to extremism, including an individualised approach for women VETOs.

Further reading

RAN (2021), [Released violent extremist or terrorist offenders – Continuity between prison, probation and reintegration](#), Cross-cutting thematic event, 6 October 2021.

RAN (2022), [Responses to returning foreign terrorist fighters and their families](#), RAN Manual.

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

RAN (2022), [Management of returning FTFs and their family members with a focus on returning women and children](#), Cross-cutting thematic event, 14-15 December 2021.

CTED, [Analytical Brief on the management of violent extremist prisoners and the prevention of radicalization to violence in prison](#)