4. Addressing Public Attitudes of Stigma and Fear

As noted above, for sustainable reintegration and rehabilitation, the receiving communities must have systems in place to accept the returnees, while addressing the fears, anger and concerns of their existing members. Sensitization and awareness-raising sessions regarding the particular experiences of women and girl returnees, including the abuse they may have suffered at the hands of armed group or security forces, need to be designed with care, to help reduce stigmatization and generate more support for victims.[142] In addition, states have specific obligations from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to eradicate negative stereotypes about women.[143]

Yet given that many of the women and girl returnees may harbour sympathies for the groups or their own male relatives who were members of such groups, the reweaving of social fabric and community trust can be fraught. From Europe to Asia, the anger among locals who have been victims of terror attacks, or inadvertently profiled and targeted by security actors because of their ethnic or religious identity, cannot be underestimated. If left unaddressed it can metastasize into different forms of extremism. Successful programmes have greater impact and greater legitimacy when they are developed by communities and informed by a local understanding of social norms, community relationships, and cultural traditions.[144]

Raising awareness of stigma

A key challenge facing women and girls is the stigma and shame that community members and their close and extended families may feel towards them. For women as for men, cultural norms typically dictate behaviour that is valued, and that which is denigrated. But there are key differences. Historically and across the world, men returning from war or conflict are seen as heroes or feared and respected for their ability to perpetrate violence.

Women, on the other hand, particularly in more traditional cultures, are often accused of transgressing social norms. The implication is invariably tied to sexuality and presumed promiscuity. Since they are perceived as belonging to the father or male clan leader, even if they were abducted or coerced and victims of violence, they are labelled as bringing shame and dishonour to their families. It is also tied to notions of masculinity. The sexual violation of women is seen as an attack on that masculinity, because men were unable to fulfil their roles as protectors.

Those who have been subject to sexual abuse may be further abused as families or communities stigmatize or blame them for bringing dishonour to their name. It can lead to so-called honour killings. In the case of the Boko Haram women who have returned with their children, some are accused of producing children of "bad blood", as if the ideology and practices of violent extremism could be biologically inherited.[145] So victims and their children are stigmatized and further marginalized.[146]

---

[142] UN Inter-agency Working Group on Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (2006), IDDRS: Women, Gender and DDR (available at: http://www.unddr.org/iddrs.aspx).
[143] Ibid.
[144] Holmer, G. & Shtuni, A. (2010). Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative. USIP
[145] 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.
[146] Amnesty International (2008). Liberia: A flawed process discriminates against women and girls (available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR34/004/2008/en/).

Communities and families may mistrust the returnees, fearing that they will perpetrate violence in their community. They may also be angry because having a relative as a member of a violent extremist group implies guilt by association for other family members. These issues take time to resolve and require holistic interventions. Along with the returnees themselves, families, community leaders, local authorities and service providers, and the media have their roles to play.

The role of women-led community organizations

It takes time to rebuild trust between community members, those reintegrated, and security actors. Community-based organizations (CBOs) make this possible. Lessons from DDR programming show that both male community leaders and women's organizations can play a vital role. As noted above, women-led CSOs in receiving communities are well placed to design and distribute information related to rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.[147]

Engaging community leaders to involve former girl combatants in social activities has also been successful in strengthening relationships and changing the way family and friends view the girls.[148] In Iraq, Yazidi community leaders embraced the returning girls, modelling acceptance, dispelling stigma from the sexual violence they survived, and protecting them from honour killings.[149] They have worked to provide the girls with health care and counselling, including arranging for some to go to Germany to receive specialized treatment.[150]

C-SAVE, a coalition of CBOs in Indonesia, conducts public education programming to sensitize communities to the issues and combat stigma against returnees, especially women and children.[151] This approach was shown to work in Liberia, where some Child Welfare Committees also practice mediation with children, families and communities if needed.[152] Children of returning women and girls face specific challenges in school, including stigmatization for being born of sexual violence or affiliated with violent extremism through their parentage. Educators and school administrators should be prepared to understand, support and manage these children in the classroom in ways that contribute to long-term rehabilitation and reintegration of the individual, community and society.[153]

The role of the media

From social media and global satellite television stations to national newspapers and local community radio, the media plays a critical role in informing and shaping the public's perceptions and attitudes towards those who are radicalized and the phenomenon of violent extremism. The media is also the arena in which extremist groups have excelled and proven themselves adept at conveying their messages to recruit and radicalize followers, both men and women. Reintegration and rehabilitation programmes also require a strong media and communications component. While freedom of expression should be respected, states also have duties to combat hate speech and incitation to violence or to violating human rights.[154]

---

[147] O'Neil, J. (2015), Engaging Women in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration: Insights for Colombia.
[148] Molyneux, T. (2018), It is time to end the child soldier stereotype. IRIN News.
[149] CNN (2015), Fleeing ISIS tyranny: Agony of the Yazidis (available at: https://www.cnn.com/2015/09/28/middleeast/iraq-yazidis-agony/index.html).
[150] Ibid.
[151] Interview with Mira Kusumarini, GSX Oslo Workshop, April 2018.
[152] ILO (2007), Red Shoes: Experiences of girl-combatants in Liberia (available at: http://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/WCMS_116435/lang--en/index.htm).
[153] 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. (available at: https://www.international-alert.org/publications/bad-blood).
[154] CERD (1965), International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, Article 4(a) and ICCPR (1966), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 20(2).

But invariably the media's involvement is akin to a double-edged sword. Responsible and objective journalism could be a means of mitigating fears, reducing the stigma and providing a shared platform for dialogue and public discussion of the complexities and nuances of experiences pertaining to violent extremism. It can be a means of generating public understanding and perhaps good-will and support for victims. It can help amplify the voices of human rights defenders who may challenge heavy-handed state security apparatus or point to deep structural drivers of radicalization such as corruption and criminality. Yet across Asia, Africa, Europe and beyond, mainstream media outlets rarely engage in such nuanced debates. More often than not, the tabloid and popular press are part of the problem, with their sensationalized coverage of events. Women peacebuilders have noted, "Media is either sensationalizing violent extremists or portraying people as passive victims. They rarely air the actions or perspectives of women or youth who are doing peace work on the ground."[155]
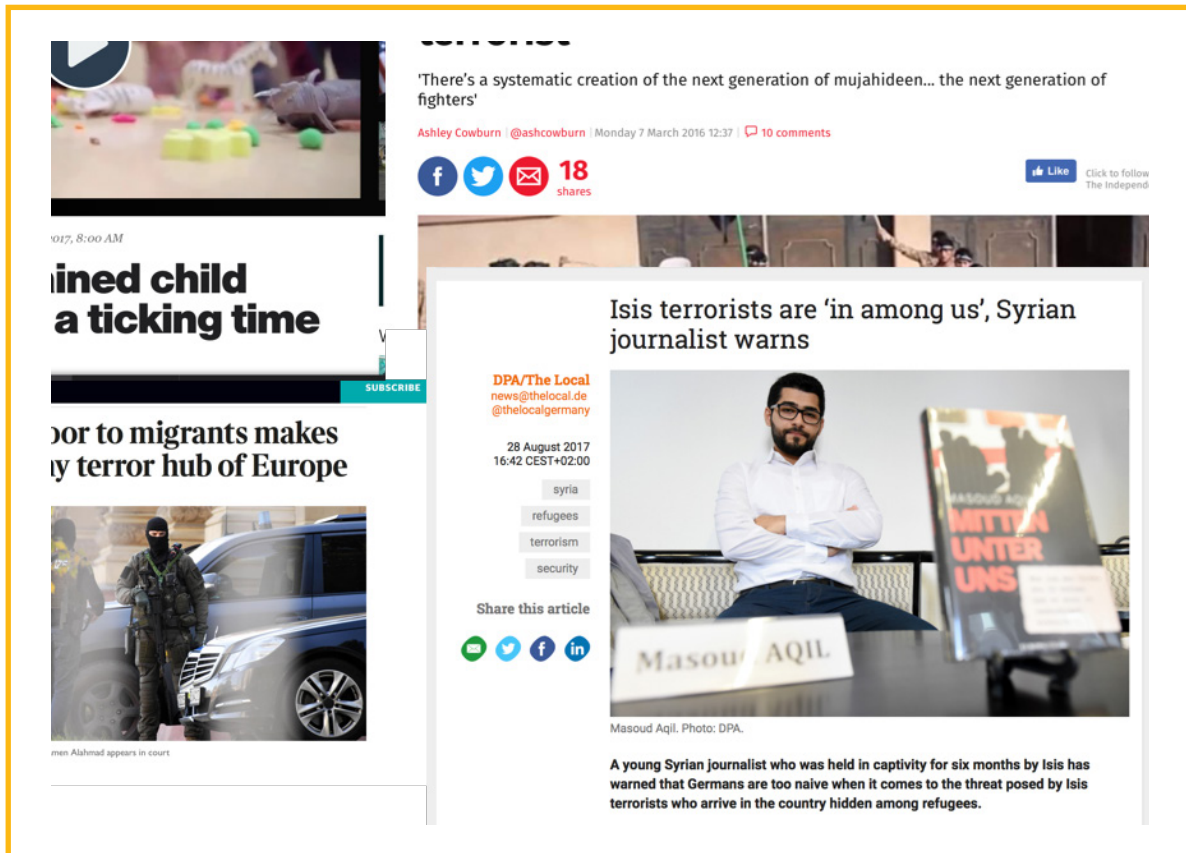

Figure 7. Headlines about returnees from major news outlets in four different countries.[156]

Even a cursory review of media discourse from around the world reveals the extent to which outlets can stoke fear and anxiety about returnees (See Figure 8). In some instances, media reports characterize children, even babies, as a threat because of fears about their present or future indoctrination.[157] Yet for years the evidence has shown that sensational media coverage of terrorism in fact invites further violence.[158]

---

[155] Summary remarks by Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, ICAN What the Women Say Forum, November 2017, Rabat, Morocco.
[156] Clockwise from top left: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-trained-child-soldiers-cbsn-on-assignment/; https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/over-31000-women-are-currently-pregnant-within-the-so-called-islamic-state-new-report-reveals-a6916756.html; https://www.thelocal.de/20170828/isis-terrorists-are-in-among-us-syrian-journalist-warns; https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/open-door-to-migrants-makes-germany-terror-hub-of-europe-2x02xl72f.
[157] 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 (available at: https://www.international-alert.org/publications/bad-blood).
[158] The Atlantic (2017), 'Terrorism Is Aimed at the People Watching' (available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/terrorism-is-aimed-at-the-people-watching/527724/).

The challenge for policymakers and practitioners is therefore how to use this essential tool for raising public awareness and expanding spaces for broader discourse to air fears, allay concerns and foster wider community support for rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives. Responsible journalism can facilitate an informed and balanced public debate about the issue of returnees, that takes into consideration the complexities of their experiences. It could also be a means of highlighting the profound harm and risks of stigmatization that women in particular may endure. There are experiences to draw from and adapt.

Examples from other contexts can help. Mexico has profoundly high levels of violence against women. Femicide claims an average of seven women's lives every day.[159] The Women's Observatory collective uses the media to draw public attention to the country's epidemic of femicide. As Rodolfo Dominguez of the Observatory notes, "By being in the media, [the group] increases political pressure" to demand greater security and justice from the state and generate public concern.[160] "It is also a way of constructing collective memory, trying to remember the women as people who had a vision for their life and whose life was ended," noted Dominguez.[161]

It is also an essential platform for challenging the ideology that continues to drive violent radicalization. In Libya for example, Shahrazad Maghrabi, co-founder of the Libyan Women's Forum (LWF) has been working with the media to bring Islamic scholars and women community leaders together to discuss religious narratives that challenge extremist views. "Our work enforces the role of women in building peace and social cohesion. We counter the violent extremist discourse with balanced religious discourse. We chose this because Libyan society is being influenced by religion and religious leaders through media. We can use their own tools to counter it. No matter how many workshops we do, or how much we talk about it, we can't reach out to everyone. We found the media to be a key tool, through three platforms: radio, local newspapers, TV. On the TV we have debates with women present, and we invite local leaders (MPs, political, different capacities) to discuss and talk about social cohesion, peacebuilding and women's roles in it. It spreads clear messages that the Quran text is peaceful."[162]

In Tunisia, scholar and media commentator Amel Grami uses her weekly column to raise awareness of critical issues related to radicalization as well as the role of women.[163] Youth leader Ahlem Nasraoui noted the media's importance for spreading information and as a tool for learning and countering the messages of violent extremist groups. She notes, "In order to counter the many channels violent extremist groups have, we have to use the same channels—our own TV, videos, social media, channels. We created a mini-series featuring people's lives: "My Life in 60 Seconds"—not just featuring people who are successful but also jumping into a taxi and interviewing the driver about why he is proud to be Tunisian."[164]

In Algeria, where the public space for discourse is limited, civil society actors work with creative media to ensure that memory is not lost. "In 2017, we asked for writing about Islamist violence," noted one human rights defender.[165] "We also worked with victims who wrote theatre plays about their experience. We do this with the help of professionals, including with painters who draw people's experiences, and we work on getting these works out to the wider public and support researchers in the field."[166]

[159] Reuters (2017), Seven each day: Mexican women murders on the rise amid drug wars (available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-women/seven-each-day-mexican-women-murders-on-the-rise-amid-drug-wars-idUSKBN1E92JN).
[160] Remarks at ICAN Forum in Rabat, Morocco, November 2017.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Remarks at ICAN Forum in Rabat, Morocco, November 2017.
[163] Remarks by Dr. Amel Grami, Professor of Gender Studies and Islamic Studies at the University of Manouba, Tunisia, GSX workshop April 26-27, 2018 in Oslo, Norway.
[164] Remarks at ICAN Forum in Rabat, Morocco, November 2017.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid.

A public voice, a personal risk

Yet even if media coverage is balanced, public fear and anger cannot be underestimated. As evident from social media experiences, threats of violence and death are not uncommon against individuals who dare to propose moderate solutions or question the efficacy of hard security approaches. Media exposure can also be dangerous for the returnees and human rights activists themselves, as they may become targets of revenge or hate-fuelled attacks. In Libya, LWF established two radio programmes including "Libyan Women of the Day on Politics" that were hosted by women. One had to stop because of threats from militias. In Algeria the Reconciliation Charter erases the experiences of victims. If activists write a press release about these events, they can be detained or fined.[167] In Pakistan, activists face threats from state and non-state actors when their work and its impact is acknowledged in the public and media spaces. In Mexico, politicians co-opt the narratives of the activists but do little to support their cause, so the media has to devise alternative strategies to sustain the pressure for political and legislative change.

Training journalists

From Afghanistan to Tunisia, Maldives to Mexico, local peace and rights organizations such as the members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) are also actively involved in training journalists. The trainings range from sensitizing them to issues of violent extremism, gender analysis and gender-responsiveness, and engaging them as allies so they use their platform to amplify the issues.

From Europe to Asia, the anger among locals who have been victims of terror attacks, or inadvertently profiled and targeted by security actors because of their ethnic or religious identity, cannot be underestimated.

---

[167] Amnesty International (2007), Algeria Briefing to the Human Rights Committee (available at: http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4705e9782.pdf).

Women and children affected by Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria