MotherSchools North Macedonia

Parenting for Peace in Skopje and Beyond

Women without Borders

Impact Report | 2022

MOTHERSCHOOLS NORTH MACEDONIA

PARENTING FOR PEACE IN SKOPJE AND BEYOND

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About Women without Borders

Women without Borders (WwB) is an international non-profit organisation headquartered in Vienna. WwB focuses on Women Leadership, Capacity Building, Gender Based Violence, Intercultural Dialogue, and Preventing Violent Extremism. We commit and apply ourselves to: Working from the bottom up and empowering the women leaders of tomorrow at the individual, community, and global levels; supporting and inspiring women in the process of moving from victimhood towards agency; advocating for a future without fear, suppression, and violence against women; introducing and normalising the idea of mothers as the first line of defence against extremism in their homes and communities; and bringing the voices of impactful local leaders to the attention of the world.

About ZIP Institute

Established in 2011, ZIP Institute is a non-governmental organisation that produces and disseminates high-quality, objective, and comprehensive ideas and projects. The Institute works on issues central to the democratisation and EU Integration of North Macedonia.

Acknowledgements

Two successive iterations of the MotherSchools North Macedonia Parenting for Peace programme were implemented by Women without Borders and its local partner ZIP Institute between 2018 and 2021. The project was made possible through the generous support of the United States Department of State.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The following summary provides an overview of the project's key findings and impacts in four parts, which serves as a high-level summary of the report's 'Insights to Impact' chapter. The below columns on the left present the Entry Interview analysis and provide the 'baseline context'—the point of departure of prospective Participants. The impact findings analysis, in turn, is presented in the right-hand columns; these are based on the Exit Interviews. The side-by-side presentation of the baseline findings and the subsequent impact illustrates the Participants' transformation through the programme. All insight and impact findings are based on WwB's qualitative data analysis (QDA) of Participant, Teacher, and Notetaker feedback from the 248 semi-structured Entry and Exit Interviews conducted by WwB in the six communities of implementation across North Macedonia.

MotherSchools Impact Building Blocks

1. Developing Awareness & Knowledge of Violent Extremism
2. Growing Confident Role Models in Safe Space Environments
3. Addressing Familial Push Factors by Upgrading Parenting
4. Rebuilding Community Resilience with Prevention Networks of Mothers

1. Developing Mothers' Awareness & Knowledge of Violent Extremism

Extremism & Security Role Awareness Gaps Baseline Findings	**Aware & Knowledgeable** MotherSchools Impact
Prospective participants prior to the start of their MotherSchools education generally possessed limited awareness and knowledge of violent extremism, viewing it as a problem external to their lives and communities that they had learned about merely through media reporting. A closer inspection revealed that the incomplete and convoluted portrayal of extremism was at least in part a product of its taboo topic status. Evident contradictions and awareness gaps across all groups notwithstanding, several interviewees identified possible signs and manifestations of extremism, past and present. The threat-trend appeared by some mothers' estimations to be on the rise.	The graduates have significantly boosted their awareness levels of violent extremism as a domestic threat and are now noticeably more concerned about the security and vulnerability of their children. These attitudinal changes include a newfound desire to remove the silence around the topic. Session learnings and conversations around the role of women in prevention and peacebuilding has introduced to the mothers the notion that they can be an important part of the soft power security architecture in their homes and communities, which had been a novel concept that they now fully embrace and view as a responsibility.

Overall, a minority of mothers conceded to being concerned about the prospect of their children's exposure to radical influences, and fewer yet appeared to have grappled with the question of a mother's prevention responsibility and capacity.

Heightened attentiveness and deeper knowledge are enabling mothers to detect a shift towards ultra-conservative ideologies, potential early warning signs of radicalisation, and manifestations of extremism to which they previously had been largely oblivious.

2. Growing Confident Role Models in Safe Space Environments

Living in Isolation and Silence Baseline Findings	**Confident – United – Empowered** MotherSchools Impact
The traditional family milieus and conservative community contexts of MotherSchools participants clearly proved to have had a dampening effect on their confidence, potential, and willingness to speak openly. Mothers reported feeling isolated, exposed to a "culture of gossip", and generally being severely disadvantaged and discriminated against based on their gender. Being limited to their prescribed role as mothers and symptomatic of their lack of independence helped to explain why most tended to view their children as the main source of pride and self-worth. Resulting gaps in formal education coupled with their being confined in many cases to the domestic sphere offer an indication of the mothers' incomplete baseline understanding of extremism.	Through the safe space environment and group process, graduates built trusted relationships—often for the first time in their lives—and advanced their self-confidence levels considerably. Each group's network of likeminded allies now acts as a local support system: a source of courage and knowledge to remove the many layers of isolation, discrimination, and self-doubt that they hitherto had endured in silence. In eroding seclusion and embracing courage, mothers are now challenging many of the very pressures that had been standing in the way of their personal well-being and safeguarding potential. This empowerment process is encouraging them to develop their independence, find their voice to broach taboo topics that can be classified as drivers of extremism, and ultimately position themselves as role models. Among the clearest expressions of this boost in self-confidence levels arguably lies in the mothers' readiness and early successes to assert themselves vis-à-vis their family members, marking an important step towards fortifying authority and respect, and claiming their rights.

3. Addressing Familial Push Factors by Upgrading Parenting

Family Violence & Missing Parenting Methods Baseline Findings	**Communicative & Peaceful Families** MotherSchools Impact
The baseline data produced ample evidence of family conditions and dynamics that amplify the vulnerability of children to toxic influences, with the presence of psychological and physical forms of violence figuring as the gravest familial push factor. A consideration of the methods that participants employed suggests that although most had a rudimentary understanding of parenting concepts,	In stark contrast to the baseline discussions, mothers disclosed how previously they had applied harsh forms of disciplining like shouting and beating but are now abandoning these methods in favour of open communication. Applying critical thinking and inclusive techniques in lieu of fear tactics is aiding mothers to strengthen familial trust, broach important taboo topics including radicalisation, and

mothers with pubescent children frequently expressed feeling overwhelmed, apprehensive, and helpless. Communication disconnects featured among the most prevalent issues.

The entry interviews exposed a strong set of clusters of basic universal parenting concepts, including listening and maintaining an emotional proximity to children. On the surface, families appeared to be relatively peaceful and functional. Yet a clear rift between the intentions and capacity of mothers to deal with the developmental phases of children in a contextualised manner became intensely apparent.

to thus position themselves as trusted authority and safeguarding figures within their homes.

Upgraded and nuanced communication styles within families gave way to family conversations around radicalisation and other sensitive topics, fostered the independence and readiness of youths to reflect critically on these issues, and in a few instances even alerted mothers to their children's personal experience with or nascent attraction to the idea of extremism.

Beyond strengthening the emotional and intellectual bond with their children, mothers report to have improved their marital relationships and in some cases are succeeding in enlisting their husbands as security allies at home. With mothers now more confidently asserting their voice and disseminating knowledge, husbands who had previously acted as an obstacle to the efforts and wellbeing of their wives are becoming more engaged and receptive of the Parenting for Peace philosophy.

4. Rebuilding Community Resilience with Prevention Networks of Mothers

Security Gaps & Limited Perspectives Baseline Findings	**Robust Networks & Uprooted Hotspots** MotherSchools Impact
Across the board, prospective participants painted a bleak picture of their country and community environments, holding the view that North Macedonian youths were offered limited perspectives and inadequate support by the state. When contemplating the prospects of the new generation, mothers conveyed deep mistrust towards institutions on the one hand, and little faith in community-level engagement on the other hand. Overall, the entry conversations revealed that children were at considerable risk of falling victim to radical influences due to lacking community cohesion, an apparent neglect of safeguarding efforts, and poor socio-economic conditions. An absence of prevention and intervention mechanisms, networks, and actors in most towns made this void in security especially obvious.	The mothers of North Macedonia have begun harnessing their confidence and competence training beyond familial settings, overcoming perceived limits to their changemaker potential in the process. They are actively positioning themselves as security stakeholders, broaching the taboo topic of violent extremism and disseminating knowledge around parental safeguarding techniques and responsibilities at the community level. Moving from awareness to action, mothers reported on how they are speaking openly about the issue of extremism and radicalisation at the community level for the first time in their lives. Graduates are going further by employing their new networks of mothers to uproot networks of radicals in their surroundings. Whereas all groups succeeded in detecting toxic influences, some have even proceeded to take individual and coordinated group action to address apparent manifestations like recruitment hotspots operating in their town.

ABBREVIATIONS

CT	Counterterrorism
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
LIP	Local Implementing Partner
MPVE	Mothers Preventing Violent Extremism
MS	MotherSchools
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
QDA	qualitative data analysis
SAVE	Sisters Against Violent Extremism
WwB	Women without Borders

GLOSSARY

MotherSchools Model	Developed by WwB in 2012, and implemented across sixteen countries since, to reduce the spread of extremist ideologies by training mothers and activating their potential to intervene in the radicalisation process of their children. Each MotherSchools programme typically graduates a total of sixty mothers across three MotherSchools groups running in parallel.
Women without Borders	In charge of overall project and programme development, project management, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. As the project lead, WwB is responsible for the entire project lifecycle and the development and refinement of all programmatic elements for the implementation of the MotherSchools.
Local Implementing Partner	Tasked with coordinating local project management, mobilisation process, logistics, and implementation. LIPs are local non-profit organisations with an understanding of the challenges on the ground, and the capacity and capability to partner with WwB to deliver and scale MotherSchools locally.
MotherSchools Trainers	Trainers are part of the WwB team and deliver the MotherSchools Training of Trainers (ToT) Workshop in the project location to prepare prospective Teachers and Notetakers to deliver the MotherSchools Curriculum.
MotherSchools Participants	Mothers of adolescents and young adults who fear that their children may be susceptible to the lure of extremist groups. Participants each receive an average of forty hours of training across ten MotherSchools Sessions over the course of three months in order to become active MotherSchools Role Models and transfer their learnings to their families and communities.
MotherSchools Teachers	Teachers are local professionals and active members of their communities with a background in psychology, sociology, social work, teaching or similar relevant fields of expertise. The MotherSchools Teachers deliver the MotherSchools Curriculum locally to Participants. They are identified jointly by the Local Implementing Partner, Mobilisers, and WwB. Following the completion of the WwB-run ToT Workshop, they are responsible for running a series of ten MotherSchools Sessions.
MotherSchools Notetakers	Observers in the MotherSchools Sessions responsible for keeping track of group dynamics and supporting the Teachers in the documentation and monitoring of the programme. They also partake in WwB's ToT and receive the necessary training to deliver weekly monitoring summaries.
MotherSchools Mobilisers	Individuals or grassroots-level organisations working locally to assist in the process of identifying and mobilising suitable Trainers, Teachers, and Participants. Mobilisers engage with local partners and provide support at the grassroots level.

Contents

1.0 INTRODUCTION

• Radicalisation in North Macedonia •

> *In the last twenty years, the process of radicalisation started with teenagers when I was in the community. … The majority of the influences were students who studied in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan. At first it was just usual practices, but over time it was not just practicing. … The hard power only intervened when it was the last stage. Nothing was done until then. There were no other approaches. Families had been left to deal with it themselves. With the soft approach, it is important to react to the early warning signs and to have a person they can approach with problems, and to build groups. This is prevention and early treatment.*[1]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Ljubin Group, Entry Interview*

Between the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the present day, Western Balkan countries have experienced several waves of radicalisation. Where religion had previously been undermined in favour of communism, the resulting void swiftly became the attraction of youth populations in search of identity. Extremist ideologies became manifest with the opening of the region to the outside world, which exposed the cluster of young nation states to external influences, including groupings and countries promoting ultra-conservative and political forms of Islam. As evidenced by more recent waves, however, the depiction of violent extremism as an external and imported phenomenon can no longer be sustained. Homegrown radical groups have consolidated their presence, taking advantage of new and evolving pressures on identities that are shaped in large part by struggles with the lingering legacies of violent conflict and a history of shifting geopolitical circumstance. Boasting one of Europe's highest per capita rate of individuals who left to fight in Iraq and Syria, North Macedonia has not just been among the most impacted countries in the Western Balkans over the past decade; the sources of its toxic influences—including radical Imams and preachers—have also aided extremism in spilling over and affecting communities across its borders.[2]

The cyclical nature and longer history of radicalisation in North Macedonia inevitably led counter-extremism actors to recognise the importance of prevention work, most notably as a counterpart or indeed precursor to hard power efforts. Against this background, the potential

[1] 201124 MAC MST ExRK 1 (Ljubin), Paragraph 74 – 79.
[2] For an overview of historical dynamics, based on first-hand testimony from an earlier MotherSchools iteration in North Macedonia, are also contained in: Edit Schlaffer, Laura Kropiunigg, et al., 'Mothers Preventing Violent Extremism: The Example of MotherSchools in Macedonia from Philosophy to Practice', NATO publication, IOS Press, 2018.

prevention roles and responsibilities of community members have also gradually come into view, and not least because recruiters increasingly adapted their tactics to address local grievances while structural deficits in families and communities endured.

In light of lower levels of extremist recruitment in recent years, North Macedonia is in a period of relative calm during which community-based prevention efforts are most relevant and effective. During this stage, communities tend to be more receptive to P/CVE programming, thus reducing the barriers to entry. Community access and trust-building are prerequisites to successfully reaching at-risk individuals, strengthening local resilience, spreading awareness of early warning signs, and positioning local-level actors as prevention actors overall. With a view to the future, early prevention and intervention groundwork ultimately makes it possible to go beyond fighting the symptoms of terrorism by focusing on where they take root, and to thus effect changes long before radicalisation surpasses the stage at which hard power become the only viable response. In other words, communities have the power to outsmart recruiters by addressing vulnerabilities and reclaiming misappropriated tools and methods.

A thus far missing aspect in many vulnerable communities has revolved around building up the necessary awareness, confidence, and practical skills of family members to become prevention actors in their homes and communities. Although long overlooked, parenting practices can be a deciding factor in the radicalisation process.[3] Authoritarian parenting styles as well as communication gaps among family and community members, for instance, can act as central push factors that further isolate children and motivate them to emulate or adopt violent methods. In the absence of addressing these root causes in at-risk communities, structures and dynamics strengthening the youth's susceptibility to recruiters inevitably are sustained across generations.

1.1 The MotherSchools Model •

To address the gaps in contemporary security strategies, Women without Borders developed the evidence-based and continuously evolving 'MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace' Model.

[3] Schlaffer and Kropiunigg, 'Can Mothers Challenge Extremism? Mothers' Perception and Attitudes of Radicalization and Violent Extremism', (Research Study, Women without Borders, 2015); Lösel, King, Bender, et al., 'Protective factors against extremism and violent radicalization: A systematic review of research'. *International Journal of Developmental science* 12/1-2 (2008): 89–102.

The programme has since its inception in 2012 worked to engage concerned and affected mothers of adolescents and young adults whose environment has made them prone to recruitment efforts. This community-based resilience building approach, which to date has been implemented in sixteen countries affected by terrorism, positions mothers as role models and the first responders to burgeoning signs of extremism in their homes and neighbourhoods.

The MotherSchools Curriculum employs developmental psychology, self-confidence training, and theoretical sessions to define radicalisation and prevention at the individual, family, and community levels. The Sessions allow mothers to re-visit, re-evaluate, and re-shape their notion of parenting by learning about the psychological dynamics and stages of childhood and adolescence. In refining their communication skills in the familial context, the programme equips mothers to react to early warning signs and grievances that can lead to radicalisation. Mothers also learn how to introduce and develop alternative narratives that foster a positive youth culture and strengthen resilience. In so doing, MotherSchools empower women to demonstrate leadership and promote family and community tolerance, forgiveness, and cohesion.

The programme guides participants through a process of gradual awareness-building in three successive stages: starting with the self, moving on to the family and community, and finally arriving at the individual's role in security. Sessions include exercises that facilitate dialogue, information exchanges, and critical reflection using context-based techniques that apply to the participants' daily lives. In communities where youths are being misappropriated by extremist organisations and face the risk of being recruited and radicalised, the MotherSchools programme provides this training to groups of mothers to harness their hitherto untapped potential of identifying nascent indications and intervening in the initial stages of the process. Beyond creating actionable networks of women prevention stakeholders, the integrated and comprehensive nature of the Model ensures that local capacity is advanced in tandem.

1.2 A Brief History of Parenting for Peace in North Macedonia •

In recognising the urgency of bringing family members into the prevention fold across the Western Balkans, North Macedonia became the first Western Balkan country to adopt WwB's Parenting for Peace philosophy. The MotherSchools Model was first implemented with the support of the US Embassy in Skopje in 2016. Through WwB's long-term presence and the completion of multiple iterations across the country since, a growing number and wide range

of stakeholders at all levels of society have become sensitised to the importance and effectiveness of family-based prevention efforts. The Parenting for Peace philosophy and learnings meanwhile have been disseminated by an in-country MotherSchools alumnae network now hundreds of graduates strong.

Stakeholder and beneficiary feedback shows how WwB's long-term investment in North Macedonia has had a rippling effect. First, the communities at-risk are clearly more sensitised to the threat and more receptive to the MotherSchools, with waiting lists of mothers across North Macedonian communities who desire to join the programme now being the norm. Second, the more seamless implementation of the programme is owed to a combination of factors, including but not limited to WwB's refined MotherSchools approach over time and WwB's capacity building investment in its local implementing network, who have, inter alia, gained valuable project managing mentorship from WwB team members. The North Macedonian MotherSchools chapter illustrates how highly affective, adaptable, and responsive the prevention programme is, especially when considering contextual changes over time.

1.3 MotherSchools Implementation •

Owing to the momentum and demand for MotherSchools programming across North Macedonia, WwB between 2018 and 2021 implemented two successive iterations of the programme with the support of the Department of State's Counter-Terrorism Bureau. This effort was part of a multi-country implementation project additionally spanning Bangladesh, Kosovo, and Montenegro. The two North Macedonian rounds are the subject of this impact report. Between 2018 and 2021 seven MotherSchools groups convened in the six North Macedonian communities of Čair, Gostivar, Ljubin, Saraj, Studeničani, and Tetovo—where two groups ran in parallel. The end-to-end deployment was achieved through the following five steps: Programming & Local Assessment; MotherSchools Trainings; MotherSchools Roll-Out; Graduation Ceremony and Social Outreach; and Monitoring and Evaluation.

The findings presented in this report highlight how central contributing factors leading to radicalisation in North Macedonian communities have been addressed through the MotherSchools Model. In a broader sense, the impact is the product of WwB's efforts in two central respects. First, in terms of local capacity built by virtue of training ZIP Institute in project management and coordination, and by WwB Trainers delivering two ToT Workshops to a pool of professionals, resulting in thirty-three prospective Teachers and Notetakers.

Second, regarding knowledge transfer, whereby fourteen of the qualified Teachers were chosen to deliver the Curriculum to seven groups of mothers over the course of three to four months. This effort culminated in over one hundred mothers completing and graduating from the programme. Graduates each received over forty hours of training to become role models and prevention stakeholders in their homes and neighbourhoods.

1.4 Impact Analysis and Presentation of Findings •

To capture the transformation of programme beneficiaries over time, this report presents the qualitative data analysis (QDA) findings of 248 semi-structured interviews that were conducted with all Participants, Teachers, and Notetakers before and following the MotherSchools roll-out. The Entry Interviews, conducted prior to the start of the programme, were analysed to establish the 'baseline context', which refers to the Participants' point of departure in terms of awareness, confidence, competence. The Exit Interviews conducted following programme completion were analysed to determine the 'distance travelled' by graduates, and thus to establish the overall impact of the MotherSchools implementation rounds across all groups. The QDA method made it possible to code against significant themes and identify the following four building blocks that proved integral to developing the prevention potential of mothers, with a view to positioning them as familial and community role models who work to reduce the spread of violent extremism in vulnerable pockets across North Macedonia.

1. Developing Awareness & Knowledge of Violent Extremism
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3. Addressing Familial Push Factors by Upgrading Parenting
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The impact findings are structured thematically and semi-chronologically in the above manner to trace how Teachers employed the Curriculum to take Participants through a process of gradual awareness-building, moving successively from the self to the family, and ultimately arriving at the community level. The final analysis thus provides a comprehensive understanding of changes in attitude and behaviour, knowledge gained, and direct action taken. The interviews were conducted by WwB at the respective session venues as well as virtually due to coronavirus-related restrictions. Each WwB interviewer, when necessary, had a

translator to assist the interview process. On average, each of the Entry and Exit interviews lasted over an hour. Most interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. In all cases where WwB did not receive consent to record, interviews were transcribed in real time with the consent of the interview partner. This effort ultimately resulted in around 248 hours of transcribed conversations. The two data sets—i.e. all Entry and all Exit interviews in written form—were processed by WwB using the 'f4 Analyse' software; a data analysis tool that enables coding against themes to identify common patterns and concepts across all interviews. The themes WwB coded against include self-confidence and self-esteem; family dynamics; parent-child relationships and communication; conceptual understanding of concepts like radicalisation and violent extremism; and perception and knowledge of threats in their community. This report offers a summary and analysis of the resulting findings to capture and better understand participants' changes in terms of, inter alia, attitudes, awareness levels, knowledge base, behaviour, and familial and community dynamics.

The findings in the subsequent 'Insights to Impact' chapter provide conclusive evidence that the MotherSchools North Macedonia iterations have advanced WwB's theory of change in no small measure. Namely, that in equipping mothers with the competence and confidence to translate their unique potential into action, they will become the first line of defence against extremism in at-risk communities around the globe.

1.5 Challenges, Gaps, and Data Limitations •

Before turning to the MotherSchools 'Insights to Impact' chapter, this section briefly considers possible and established shortcomings—including external and internal factors—relating to the community and country contexts, and to MotherSchools-related activities. From the outset, the long-term presence of WwB in North Macedonia helped to lessen the burden and likelihood of challenges typically associated with first-country implementations; long-term engagement can thus be considered a mitigating factor. As such, some challenges were positive in nature. This included, for instance, a better baseline understanding of and higher demand for the programme ('Some mothers were well-prepared for interviews because they knew the Teachers who had previously been part of the programme and because some had seen the MotherSchools Graduation on TV', as a mother noted). WwB and ZIP also received an exceptionally large volume of Teacher applications. As a result, the first round of MotherSchools in North Macedonia encompassed four rather than the usual three groups running in parallel.

Covid-19 presented a serious external challenge, resulting in the temporary suspension of all MotherSchools programming, including the second round of implementation in North Macedonia. The situation in North Macedonia was extremely serious: family members of mothers died, as did a Ljubin group member shortly after becoming infected ('There are about 400 of us Bosnians, this mother had daughters in our school and many mothers were friends with her; this was hard'). To sustain the positive momentum from previous rounds, WwB and ZIP worked closely with Teachers and Notetakers to keep mothers engaged in the meantime. While the pandemic acted as a severe obstacle in terms of consistent attendance and reaching the highest possible number of mothers, mothers were offered support to become sufficiently familiar with online platforms, and to attend the final of the two graduation ceremonies, which was held virtually. As part of the preparation phase for resuming MotherSchools, WwB developed a comprehensive Teacher Covid Guide and a three-tier implementation strategy (offline, hybrid, and online) to ensure a smooth and continuous rollout of MotherSchools and to avoid any further delays or pause in activities. A strategy session was held by WwB with Teachers and Notetakers to address challenges and discuss concerns and mitigation strategies before roll-out. Yet some groups did not withstand the half-year hiatus, making it necessary to re-mobilise new groups of mothers in some cases. Adding to this, where lockdowns prohibited in-person meet-ups, some mothers were hindered due to a lack of technological know-how or equipment, and some felt less ready to speak openly presumably due to factors including but not limited to high domestic violence rates in the communities of implementation and fears of being overheard. Despite setbacks, WwB, ZIP, and the Teachers succeeded in addressing these challenges in a timely and efficient manner, thus ensuring that ultimately the MotherSchools programme persevered, and that all objectives were met.

Moving beyond external factors, the data collection and interpretation process conducted by WwB through Entry and Exit interviews with all Actors and Participants demands scrutiny; it must be critically examined since even the most laborious efforts and meticulous approaches result in discernible, inherent, and even hidden data limitations and gaps. This final part of the section therefore serves to caution and remind the reader that the insights and impact findings presented in the subsequent chapter offer qualitative interpretations of the participants' personal views and insights based on all 248 interviews conducted.

A noteworthy data limitation stems from the fact that the bulk of all interviews were conducted with the support of ZIP staff, Teachers, and Notetakers who translated WwB staff

questions. On the one hand, the benefits of employing trusted interpreters arguably tend to outweigh the shortcomings, as they can offer valuable background context, they understand and have access to the interviewee's community, and may thus be a source of trust that helps to evoke more open and honest responses. On the other hand, culturally defined linguistic differences as well as translations and individual interpreter styles, inevitably lead to a degree of questions and answers being 'lost in translation'. Beyond this, working with non-professional interpreters can result in a higher probability that some of the nuances or cultural context is lost, especially when the local interpreters possess limited knowledge of concepts like radicalisation and violent extremism.

That WwB staff are foreign to North Macedonia may have had an impact on the readiness of interviewees to open up. Yet being 'foreign' to a community where notions of honour and reputation inhibit many from speaking freely also can prove to be an advantage. The authenticity of answers may have been further skewed by factors such the interviewee's possible perception of the Entry and Exit interviews as a formal means of assessment, which can prompt respondents to concentrate on what they may deem to be expected of them in such a situation, such as seeking 'the correct' rather than offering 'the truthful' answer. There are plenty of other data limitations to consider, such effects of an inherent chain of individual biases through which information passes in sequence: from interviewer to translator to interviewee, and vice versa. Or the biases of interviewers who pose questions and follow a line of enquiry that inevitably will at times fall short of taking into account cultural norms and practices that are not theirs.

With the aforementioned as well as other apparent and conceivable limitations in mind, readers of this report should be aware that quoted statements as well as WwB's interpretations and conclusions ought to be considered with some degree of critical assessment. Not all responses on the part of the interviewees and not all resulting conclusions based on the QDA method can be taken entirely at face value. It is important for readers to ask themselves critical questions, and to consider other data limitations. Nevertheless, when coding against certain themes, one can determine whether other mothers who were not part of the same group may have remarked similar changes. That is to say, the impact evaluation and conclusions put forward in this report are based on a series of statements, typically referred to as 'clusters'. Statements or 'telling stories' can therefore be viewed as representative of such clusters.

Finally, the reader of this report should bear in mind that an inherent bias in Exit data may be the result of the so-called 'Hello-Goodbye-Effect'. In the context of this programme,

the ecstatic rush that often accompanies a mother's graduation from this education programme can lead to exaggerated expressions in terms of personal, familial, and community changes. To ensure that purported improvements have not been exaggerated and with a view to understanding longer-term impact, this would require a return to communities of implementation for targeted follow-up interviews with programme beneficiaries in one or more years down the line, which would however be beyond the scope of this project.

2.0 INSIGHTS TO IMPACT

> *MotherSchools was our safe space, our small house, where we shared fears and experiences. Whenever we said, 'See you next week', they said, 'Oh, come on, we cannot wait!' They felt so good here. 'Finally somebody asked us what we want and what we think in reality', they said. Because if you have not been asked this ever, you forget how to answer. 'Nobody asked us', they said, 'how we felt before when we were girls and now mothers'. This was the moment when they became more aware who they are, what they can do, what they are and are not aware of. This was a small door that opened and led to bigger doors. Many of them said, 'I did not care about myself, because I had forgotten who I was; I forget what my priorities and ambitions were'. This was the moment when they began to make personal changes. We saw how they changed, week for week.*[4]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Tetovo Group, Exit Interview*

This chapter evaluates the insights and impact findings of the MotherSchools North Macedonia programme. The analysis is the product of a qualitative data analysis (QDA) of the 248 semi-structured Entry and Exit interviews with Participants, Teachers, and Notetakers. Each of the chapter's four sections represents an integral building block of the mothers' transformation into security stakeholders. Every section, in turn, is divided into two parts to gauge 'distance travelled' by the mothers; the qualitative data analysis findings of the Entry and Exit Interviews are presented sequentially. Following a brief thematic introduction to each building block, the first part of each section maps out the baseline context, which can be understood as the point of departure of prospective Participants in terms of confidence, knowledge, and practical skills levels. This analysis provides background details and insights into individual, family, and community dynamics prior to the start of the MotherSchools sessions. The second part of each section presents the MotherSchools impact findings to trace the extent of the graduates' personal transformations and their impact on family and community dynamics overall. The following four themes are generally structured in a chronological manner to reflect how each thematic layer is an essential building block that complements the next: Developing Awareness and Knowledge of Violent Extremism; Growing Confident Role Models in Safe Space Environments; Addressing Familial Push Factors by Upgrading Parenting; and Rebuilding Community Resilience with Prevention Networks of Mothers.

[4] 191209 MAC MST ExRK 2 (Tetovo), Paragraph 32.

2.1 Developing Awareness & Knowledge of Violent Extremism

> *I do not think there is a threat of extremism here in North Macedonia, I do not believe here in Gostivar it exists. I think abroad it exists; this is my opinion. I have heard about it on TV.*[5]
>
> *– MotherSchools Participant, Gostivar Group, Entry Interview*

> *An Albanian woman from Gostivar who joined ISIS—I know her. She has asked to come back with four children. … And my husband's sister's best friend's whole family also went to ISIS. Her father was killed there and only her brother was saved, and now he is in jail in Skopje … I learned how to prevent such phenomena from affecting our children, and when I told my husband what we are learning he said it was very good for our community.*[6]
>
> *– MotherSchools Participant, Gostivar Group, Exit Interview*

In communities where threats to adolescents and young adults loom large but have not yet transcended the stage at which prevention work becomes less effective, mothers are well-positioned to play a safeguarding role. By virtue of their physical and emotional proximity, they are the formative guardians of children and have thus proved to be successful prevention and intervention allies in the fight against extremism. Their ability to assume this role, however, depends on a cognisance of the threat and ability or indeed willingness to exercise this responsibility. As such, awareness and knowledge are indispensable aspects in any parent's prevention toolkit. For in practice there often exist glaring gaps in their knowledge of the dynamics and effects of radicalisation, and in their attentiveness to the problem and intervention potential. As the juxtaposing of the above entry and exit interview excerpts highlight, awareness, knowledge, and prevention techniques must be developed. This also demands, inter alia, understanding how community and family dynamics might be shrouding the topic in secrecy and inhibiting open conversations and awareness as a result. The following section analyses how mothers through the MotherSchools programme have grown their understanding of violent extremism and discovered that they have an active part to play in the bottom-up security architecture.

Extremism & Security Role Awareness Gaps | Baseline Context

> *There are so many threats that they face every day. For example, there are extremist groups with long beards, and they want to enlarge their groups and want others to join their groups; they have misconceived religion … Now I can protect my children, but when they reach the teenage years… I really do not know; it is very hard to be a teenager … I wish that here in*

[5] 190919 MAC MSP EnRK 3 (Gostivar), Paragraph 47.
[6] 191211 MAC MSP ExMO 3 (Gostivar), Paragraph 71.

> *our country there could be formed a group or organisation who will teach us how to protect the teenagers and younger persons from these extremist groups. I will be the first to sign up.*
>
> *– MotherSchools Participant, Tetovo Group, Entry Interview*

Prospective participants prior to the start of their MotherSchools education for the most part possessed limited awareness and knowledge of violent extremism, viewing radicalisation as a problem external to their lives and communities that they had learned about merely through media reporting. Overall, the interviewees' responses to questions surrounding the topic of extremism paint a convoluted picture that demands attention. Probing the baseline understanding of the threat produced a broad spectrum of answers that ranged from 'there is nothing like that here' to 'extremism is really common'. The most common response to questions touching upon the issue included 'I did hear about it on TV'. Further compounding this sense of ambiguity, a prevailing notion was that 'it could be an issue'. The degree of confusion around the topic becomes even more apparent when one considers countless contradictions that can be gleaned from the responses provided by future participants within and across groups. While the mothers of Studeničani, for example, appeared to be particularly divided on the issue, a number agreed that radicalisation had never impacted the village, and that the issue, if at all, existed either outside of the town or country.

A closer inspection of the baseline conversations suggests that the incomplete and convoluted portrayal of violent extremism was at least in part a product of its taboo topic status. Shedding some light on a possible explanation, one mother explained, 'In the village, they don't talk about extremism—they don't believe it's a phenomenon, they don't even want to hear about it'.[7] With Studeničani being among the most insular and isolated towns in North Macedonia, sensitive topics were not readily and only rarely broached during the entry interviews. In general, the mothers were likewise divided as to whether extremism was a taboo topic. Those who viewed it as taboo provided an intriguing variety of rationales. Whereas one mother postulated that merely talking about it could put her in harm's way, another suggested broaching the topic with her children might make them consider this path. Here, too, ambivalence and ambiguity towards the topic emerged as a common them. In summary, as an interviewee explained, 'It's not a taboo, but we wouldn't talk about it openly', while another offered, 'maybe it's camouflaged'.[8]

[7] 190920 MAC MSP EnGN 3 (Studeničani), Paragraph 42.
[8] 200212 MAC MST EnGN 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 111; 190917 MAC MST ENR 2 (Tetovo), Paragraph 31 – 32.

Evident contradictions and awareness gaps across all groups notwithstanding, several interviewees identified possible signs and manifestations of extremism, past and present. In some communities, the threat-trend appeared by some mothers' estimations to be on the rise. Among the three distinct cases that were mentioned during the baseline conversations, one was conveyed by a future MotherSchools participant from Studeničani. She disclosed how two family members had left for Syria. While a relative died there aged 21, another—her cousin—left unbeknownst to his parents three years prior. When the latter eventually returned, he apparently built a house with the earnings; money supposedly had motivated him to leave. Relaying his memory of the experience, however, the mother noted how 'he tells the family that they suffered a lot; that they were not allowed to go out'.[9] A future Notetaker recalled three examples of individuals she had known personally. Among these, a friend's twenty-year-old cousin who had been radicalised in a mosque in Skopje and was killed while fighting for ISIS. The other two speak to divergent responses on the part of parents: in one case the family of a son who died in Syria celebrated him as a martyr; in the other case the family of a daughter alerted the authorities when they realised that she had left for Syria.[10]

That the threat had not entirely dissipated did figure as a concern to some. A future participant from Tetovo, finding it conceivable that 'it could be an issue', expressed her apprehension in this regard over a cousin who had become isolated from his family during high school, where he became influenced by 'bad company'.[11] In terms of trend shifts, mothers from all communities suggested sensing a move towards more conservative forms of practicing religion. Mothers from Saraj and Čair were most concerned about the prospect of a rise in ultra-conservative influences in recent years, with mothers citing Wahabism permeating the community, a sudden surge in niqabs, and influences from foreign countries in general. The pressures of adapting to 'new customs' was also something that a mother from Studeničani cited as a source of concern. In her words, 'If they see a woman without a hijab, they'll call her a whore'.[12]

Overall, a minority of mothers conceded to being concerned about the prospect of their children's exposure to radical influences, and fewer yet appeared to have grappled with the question of a mother's prevention responsibility and capacity. Asked whether mothers believed in the capacity to prevent their children from becoming radicalised, a fraction

[9] 190920 MAC MSP EnLK 2 (Studeničani), Paragraph 33.
[10] 190920 MAC MSN EnRK 3 (Notetaker), Paragraph 36.
[11] 190917 MAC MSP EnRK 3 (Tetovo), Paragraph 39 – 40.
[12] 190920 MAC MSP EnGN 2 (Studeničani), Paragraph 25.

of them expressed feeling somewhat confident in their abilities. 'I don't think so; that is why I am very scared … I think that the power of mothers is not enough for the protection of the child', as a Čair interviewee responded.[13] Similarly despondent, a mother from Saraj said, 'I do not think so' before explaining, 'there are a lot of mothers who live every day in their house, and it is not always in their power to prevent their children, so this workshop is going to help', presumably hinting at how their programme participation could help to break up this isolation and provide new perspectives.[14] However defeatist some of the other responses were when probed about their prevention potential, the sense of a mother's innate commitment and perseverance was shared universally. Some mothers clearly felt a safeguarding responsibility linked directly to preventing extremism. A prospective Saraj participate defined mother as 'the pillar which helps the child and educates the child, it will also be the first person who would notice that their kid is being informed by these organisations', and a Ljubin participant deemed mothers to be 'the biggest impact for this topic', responsible for 'talking at home with their children so that they avoid getting into these extremist groups'.[15] In this vein, a prospective Notetaker, referring to mothers as 'supermom' and 'known peacebuilders', emphasised how they simply 'need some support, some courage, some instructions—and they can do it'.[16] Mirroring this sentiment even more closely, a mother from Čair proposed, 'If mothers were trained and aware they could do more to solve problems'.[17]

AWARE & KNOWLEDGEABLE | MOTHERSCHOOLS IMPACT

> *At the beginning they were maybe only partially aware, but now they are entirely aware that extremism is not an external problem: that it does not just happen like it did in Syria; that terrorists can be from our country. They understand that now, and that scared them. They are scared that they could have an attack. They are also aware that their children are not immune from being radicalised. And that nobody is entirely immune.*[18]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Saraj Group, Exit Interview*

The graduates have significantly boosted their awareness levels of violent extremism as a domestic threat and are now noticeably more concerned about the security and

[13] 200213 MAC MSP EnLK 4 (Čair), Paragraph 82.
[14] 200212 MAC MSP EnLK 5 (Saraj), Paragraph 86.
[15] 200212 MAC MSP EnLK 3 (Saraj), Paragraph 83; 200211 MAC MSP EnLK 2 (Ljubin), Paragraph 76.
[16] 200211 MAC MSN EnUK 2 (Notetaker), Paragraph 43.
[17] 200213 MAC MSP EnGN 4 (Cair), Paragraph 43.
[18] 201123 MAC MST ExRK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 74 – 75.

vulnerability of their children. These attitudinal changes include a newfound desire to remove the silence around the topic. Whereas the notion that extremism was essentially a foreign issue was dispelled entirely, this realisation that terrorism was not confined to far-away places also elevated concern levels considerably. Partly this was also due to mothers learning about cases from one another, suggesting to many that particularly in recent years the issue had been more severe than many presumed. Time and again, it emerged that the graduates are now far less certain that their sons and daughters could not become affected or come under the spell of radical influences. This wake-up call prompted them to contemplate the so-called 'weak spots' of their children, as a Teacher expounded who also observed how her pupils had shed their naiveté and had begun to acknowledge their personal blind spots: 'They do not exclude the possibility that their family members might be radicalised, and they know how smart the recruiters are and how to brainwash the children'. In short, 'They are worried, scared, and aware that this can happen'. What brought the issues closer to home was the fact that while the MotherSchools were in progress, reports emerged on the radicalisation of a prominent North Macedonian doctor's son ('Especially those who were so sure that they provide everything at first, they started to think that their children could go down the wrong path').[19] The impact data suggest that the graduates of Čair have become especially alarmed. One mother explained how her cohort now views the issue as a priority above all others: 'The whole group agreed that it was and it still is our biggest concern and issue in our children's lives, because, as we put it, "you can never know when your child can be brainwashed". I think that we fear—mothers fear—extremism more than drugs'. Her reasoning centred on the view that conversations around and information on extremism were not sufficiently had and made available in the public sphere ('I think it's very manageable in our community and society … we need to talk about it more because it's not taboo when you discuss it').[20]

Session learnings and conversations around the role of women in prevention and peacebuilding has introduced to the mothers the notion that they can be an important part of the soft power security architecture, which had been a novel concept that they now fully embrace and view as a responsibility. The MotherSchools journey instilled in mothers a sense that they could not leave the security of the youth resting solely in the hands of state actors and institutions ('If mothers, fathers, and people in general want to have peace

[19] 201123 MAC MST ExRK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 65 – 66.
[20] 201126 MAC MSP ExLK 1 (Čair), Paragraph 185 – 186.

in the world, then they can do something, and not wait for the government or state'). Graduates generally expressed feeling positively surprised that they were considered as an important security ally. One of the Tetovo Teachers reiterated these points and suggested she too had discovered this new sense of responsibility for herself: 'We are responsible for our house, family, community. We should not wait and ask for security from the police and politicians, because as we know they are not doing nothing. We as women first and then members of the family have a big responsibility here'.[21] Shrewdly turning the 'peace starts at home' mantra on its head, another mother suggested that families needed to do their part to prevent the unit from becoming vulnerable to outside threats: 'All the problems start from home: if you don't support your home, if you don't do it, someone else can be like an eagle'. Beyond the curriculum learnings and session exchanges, the terrorist attack in the heart of Vienna in late 2020, which occurred during the second round of MotherSchools, also intensified the realisation that mothers have a safeguarding duty. A graduate recalled how in the wake of the attack the news of the perpetrator with North Macedonian and ethnically-Albanian roots prompted her group to talk about 'how we need to protect our children from becoming people like them'.

Heightened attentiveness and deeper knowledge are enabling mothers to detect a shift towards ultra-conservative ideologies, potential early warning signs of radicalisation, and manifestations of extremism to which they previously had been largely oblivious. Before the MotherSchools programme had been completed, mothers across different groups already began to recognise early warning signs of toxic influences in their immediate environments. At the community level, mothers have begun to see a resurgence of ultra-conservative tendencies. Four weeks into the monitoring calls with the Gostivar group, for instance, one of the Teachers disclosed how her group had grown aware of a concerning trend: 'Our community is changing, which all of the mothers do not like'. Among the signs that they drew on were mounting restrictions on women's freedoms and rights: 'We had a period where women wanted to educate themselves and become independent. That was my generation; it was the last generation. Then we had this regression'. A graduate from the Čair group expressed her new awareness in similar terms by likewise applying a gendered perspective: 'I am noticing more things now', as she explained, 'When I walk through Čair, I just see men when I want to enter a shop, and when I see a man wearing a radical beard, he does not talk to me—he does not answer when I ask for something in a shop. I now see lots of women covered in black; I see it everywhere … I think this is all happening in silence'. Like other graduates, the mother

[21] 191209 MAC MST ExRK 4 (Tetovo), Paragraph 7.

found that this had been the first time she had talked about these concerns and concluded, 'The MotherSchools is growing awareness and it should go on'.[22] Beyond noticing community transformations, graduates from the groups of Studeničani and Tetovo in fact applied their heightened awareness to identify what appeared to be possible youth recruitment and radicalisation hotspots in Studeničani and Tetovo; the latter case study example is presented in length in the final section of this impact report. The various mothers involved in both purported that their awareness was owed to their MotherSchools education and discussions during the sessions ('The early warning signs that I learned helped me to detect these problems').[23] Aside from multiple other instances, many interviewees also provided answers of a more generic nature, namely: 'I never knew that could be a problem for my children. It was the first time I have heard of it, but now I feel good because I have the necessary information; I learned the signs and what I can do to prevent it'.[24]

[22] 201127 MAC MSP ExRK 2 (Čair), Paragraph 134.
[23] 191212 MAC MSP ExRK 5 (Tetovo), Paragraph 73.
[24] 191212 MAC MSP ExES 6 (Tetovo), Paragraph 49.

2.2 Growing Confident Role Models in Safe Space Environments

> *Some of them needed to ask the husbands to come to the training. They later told us that the husbands worried about us changing their minds and making them free women. But as we worked with the training, they laughed a lot because they fought for their right to be at the training. This is a success. I know the mentality of the people. And I know how hard it was for them to be at training, because of the influence of the husbands. At the beginning some were nervous, and we explained it is for them to be stronger mothers. They told us that they had to talk a lot to their husbands. They told me how … this positive influence made the husbands less worried about them attending.*[25]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Ljubin Group, Exit Interview*

While a solid foundation of awareness and knowledge around violent extremism is integral to the safeguarding capacity of mothers, the process of moving from theory to practice tends to be highly dependent on self-confidence. In low supply of the latter, an individual will remain stuck in a state of cognitive dissonance, and thus not acting despite knowing how. Overcoming this state of paralysis demands identifying and addressing the chief symptoms. The MotherSchools education therefore has a strong empowerment function by providing a platform and safe space to unearth, discuss, and work to remove possible barriers holding participants back from acting on their potential. The following section traces mothers through a group process and safe space environment that overcame a multitude of roadblocks, ranging from social isolation and community marginalisation to feelings of helplessness and resignation. And how their new networks of trusted allies—networks of likeminded mothers—set in motion a process of empowerment at the group and individual levels. This moved the graduates decidedly closer towards the goal of taking on a security and role model position in their homes and beyond.

Living in Isolation and Silence | Baseline Context

> *We know how conservative the people are here. Women are isolated at home. They lack respect for themselves because husbands do not respect them. When children grow up—especially boys—they will not respect their mothers because they have seen this from their father. Also, they do not respect the wives. The wife also does not expect her husband to respect her. They say it is changing, but it does not look like that.*[26]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Studeničani Group, Entry Interview*

[25] 201123 MAC MST ExRK 2 (Ljubin), Paragraph 65.
[26] 190920 MAC MST EnRK 2 (Studeničani), Paragraph 16.

The traditional family milieus and conservative community contexts of MotherSchools participants clearly proved to have had a dampening effect on their confidence, potential, and willingness to speak openly. Mothers reported feeling isolated, exposed to a 'culture of gossip', and generally being severely disadvantaged and discriminated against based on their gender. Being limited to their prescribed role as mothers and symptomatic of their lack of independence helped to explain why most tended to view their children as the main source of pride and self-worth. A consideration of the biographies and demographic profiles of future participants across all groups lays bare a sizeable cluster of individuals who throughout their lifetime have been exposed to serious forms of systemic gender discrimination. Mothers reported to have been forced into early marriages, and in yet more cases marriage in general put an end to their educational and employment prospects ('I think the mentality is slow that in the way they see the education of a woman to be something irrational').[27] Husbands and in-laws looked to be the chief culprits in this sense. To cite but a few examples that mothers themselves disclosed during the entry interviews: 'When I wanted to continue with education and go to high school, the community norms and my family did not let me—"girls should not finish studies"'; 'I finished high school and I registered at university but then I got married and after they did not let me go anymore'; and 'My husband's family did not let me to continue my studies'.[28] One of the prospective Tetovo Teachers eloquently summarised the general situation, pointing to how the suppression of women's voices prevented many from even speaking about their issues. 'They hesitate to speak in public about their problems because they feel ashamed', she stated, explaining how, 'If their husband is a drinker or they have problems in marriage or family, they hesitate because they are afraid. They do not have other places to go. There is a lack of freedom and a lack of space. They are dealing with many problems because the daddies are not'.[29]

Resulting gaps in formal education coupled with their being confined in many cases to the domestic sphere offer an indication of the mothers' incomplete baseline understanding of extremism. Expressions of regret were common, and it emerged that the traditional community path that had been predestined for them was not one that the mothers generally embraced enthusiastically. On the contrary, expressions of remorse and despondency far outweighed positive responses. Many seemed to be trapped in both their past and present at

[27] 190917 MAC MSP EnLK 2 (Tetovo), Paragraph 60.
[28] 201127 MAC MSP ExRK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 94; 190917 MAC MSP EnLK 2 (Tetovo), Paragraph 18.
[29] 190918 MAC MST EnRK 5 (Tetovo), Paragraph 17.

once. Notable examples that speak to this dynamic included: 'I am not educated, I don't know. I don't want to stay inside my house … because every time you get out you learn something new … I don't know anything'; 'I don't know how to explain, I feel really sorry that I lost my career, I didn't have a supporter'; and 'I am not working and I am a little bit sad about that but it is okay. There is a missing part in me about that. I am just housewife'.[30]

Years of isolation and a lack of trusted relationships evidently had consolidated their low self-esteem. 'They don't have a space where they can be safe, and be free to talk about something, can be sure that it will not be used for something bad', a Teacher from Saraj explained.[31] Owing to a climate of distrust and shame, as an analysis of the data suggests, genuine friendships were rare. In one case, a mother reported that the severity of social pressures had caused her to experience psychosomatic disorders: 'I stay by myself, they gossip, I don't like to spend time with those sorts of people so I stay alone and read … this whole place lives off gossip … I thought that I was ill, and I went to psychologist and neuroscientist but it was just the result of what I am experiencing'.[32] The absence of trustworthy relationships across the board figured among the most frequent grievances. A future participant from Gostivar spoke for many of her peers when she responded to the question of whether there were negative people pulling her down: 'Yes, a lot: at work, at house, in the community. When you do work, they will try to find the smallest mistake; they will try to push you down'.[33] In fact, a prospective Studeničani participant cited her isolation as the very reason for seeking a safe space through the MotherSchools programme: 'It is good to go out sometimes and have company with people because I don't have friends. … [I]f you share something with them—your worries or challenge in your life—after they go out and they will discuss with others the things you share in confidence with them'.[34]

CONFIDENT – UNITED – EMPOWERED | MOTHERSCHOOLS IMPACT

> *I was surprised that they are very strong women and very powerful but do not know the techniques and tools and do not have the support to unleash that power … even if they have wishes, they are not courageous enough. But now I see that if they have the confidence and the tools and someone works with them, they will become very powerful. … It is the beginning*

[30] 200213 MAC MSP EnLK 2 (Cair), Paragraph 24 – 25; 200211 MAC MSP EnMO 1 (Ljubin), Paragraph 63; 200211 MAC MSP EnMO 2 (Ljubin), Paragraph 18.
[31] 201124 MAC MST ExLK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 103.
[32] 190920 MAC MSP EnGN 4 (Studeničani), Paragraph 33 – 34.
[33] 190919 MAC MSP EnRK 2 (Gostivar), Paragraph 40 – 41.
[34] 190920 MAC MSP EnLK 3 (Studeničani), Paragraph 15)

> *of something new. Mothers here need these things. They are just used to their lives—you do this and that, pick up your kids. But nobody talks about your potential as a woman, what you can give to society and your community. I think there's a great need to support women here.*[35]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Gostivar Group, Exit Interview*

Through the safe space environment and group process, graduates built trusted relationships—often for the first time in their lives—and advanced their self-confidence levels considerably. Each group's network of likeminded allies now acts as a local support system: a source of courage and knowledge to remove the many layers of isolation, discrimination, and self-doubt that they hitherto had endured in silence. In stark contrast to their baseline point of departure, graduates reported to have cemented friendships and tackled their social isolation as a result. A sizeable cluster in the qualitative data analysis of the exit interviews emerged around the notion of gaining confidence through trusted friendships and networks. Typical statements to this effect included, 'the most important learning was that we get socialised with friends; before that we did not have friends', 'I have more self-confidence now; everyone needs to talk to somebody', and 'we became like a family; I have fifteen sisters now'.[36] The groups had in common that trust was built over time and driven by storytelling techniques and the sharing of experiences. A Teacher from Gostivar explained how the MotherSchools ground rules offset the concern that what was discussed in the safe space of the group would become community gossip: 'The more courageous mothers began to share, and you create a bond; you know that you have to give back … Because we set the rules in the beginning, it worked'.[37] A mother from Tetovo, among others, corroborated this, recalling, 'We made a rule that the things that are said stay here. I freely expressed myself; it was so free. I expressed everything that was in me; it was like therapy for me'.[38] The realisation of being able to gain knowledge, hope, and courage through a judgement-free exchange was articulated by a graduate from Tetovo, who found, 'It helped me, to be honest, because we've lost the faith here. … This project helped us to believe in ourselves—to learn from the experiences of others'.[39] The ground rules acted as the basis to build trust and confidence on the one hand, and as a form of knowledge-sharing on the other hand.

[35] 191209 MAC MST ExRK 1 (Gostivar), Paragraph 39.
[36] 191210 MAC MSP ExLK 1 (Studeničani), Paragraph 30; 191210 MAC MSP ExGN 1 (Studeničani), Paragraph 46; 191212 MAC MSP ExES 6 (Tetovo), Paragraph 34.
[37] 191209 MAC MST ExRK 1 (Gostivar), Paragraph 31.
[38] 191212 MAC MSP ExRK 1 (Tetovo), Paragraph 47.
[39] 191212 MAC MSP ExES 3 (Tetovo), Paragraph 16.

In eroding seclusion and embracing courage, mothers are now challenging many of the very pressures that had been standing in the way of their personal well-being and safeguarding potential. This empowerment process has encouraged them to develop their independence, find their voice to broach taboo topics that can be classified as drivers of extremism, and ultimately position themselves as role models. The clearest evidence of their personal identity transformations can be gleaned from the life changes that they reported to have already made during the MotherSchools journey. Working towards strengthening their personal agency and independence was among the most common of changes. This included a mother from Gostivar who took up employment for the first time in twelve years: 'I was considering it before, but during the sessions I said to myself that I would start working, give myself more time regarding my future and my career'.[40] In Saraj, a graduate described how a heightened degree of self-confidence motivated her to break the silence around the taboo topic of domestic violence—a now well-known driver of extremism—and to actively work through her traumatic experience by putting pen to paper: 'I did not have the courage before the MotherSchools to speak openly about my concerns … I suffered domestic violence from my husband and in the MotherSchools I had the courage to speak about this and … to write an article about the domestic violence that I suffered'.[41] The positive impact of such examples cannot be understated, especially since, as in the above case, children are not immune to their mother's trauma. If left unaddressed, the experience as witnesses can act as a push factor. The barriers that graduates are now confronting also include context-specific problems, such as the dominance of in-laws over the lives of mothers. As a Ljubin Notetaker explained: 'Some of them reported that their mothers-in-law made them isolated at home and that they are under some pressure through traditions. By creating some healthy boundaries, they addressed this'.[42] The data reveals that mothers from all groups faced and tackled this barrier, with one mother from Saraj stating, 'Before, I wasn't very self-confident; I always asked the in-laws and my husband about the children. But now I take decisions by myself'.[43] Underpinning such personal and tangible changes was the realisation among participants that they needed to pay attention to their personal needs as well as shortcomings if they seek to be effective role models and guardians. This link between personal development and effective parenting was not lost on the graduates. To cite a mother who shrewdly analysed this notion, 'From this project, I understand

[40] 191211 MAC MSP ExMO 3 (Gostivar), Paragraph 26.
[41] 201125 MAC MSP ExLK 2 (Saraj), Paragraph 87 – 91.
[42] 201124 MAC MSN ExRK 1 (Ljubin), Paragraph 49 – 50.
[43] 201127 MAC MSP ExMO 2 (Saraj), Paragraph 89.

that first I have to see myself and watch out for myself and then take care of the others. If I am watching myself, it does not mean I will leave the others behind'. Rather, in working on herself, she found, 'I will do more for my children and help them more'.[44] As one of the Teachers established, 'they began to make personal changes' when the mothers understood their self-neglect and subsequently started to explore their self-worth.[45] Several graduates found that they have embraced the idea of being role models, often in discovering that they are proving to be a source of encouragement ('Some women saw me as an inspiration … I was a role model for other mothers; that also boosted my confidence'; 'I have definitely seen changes in myself, and regarding being a role model').[46]

Among the clearest expressions of this boost in self-confidence levels arguably lies in the mothers' readiness and early successes to assert themselves vis-à-vis their family members, marking an important step towards fortifying authority and respect, and claiming their rights. With in-laws traditionally having a tight grip over mothers, as the entry interviews indicated, participants often had been at the mercy of their viewpoints and directives; some reported that mothers-in-law were sabotaging their parenting approaches and reducing them to their 'housewife duties'. A Tetovo Teacher recalled a telling example of behavioural change to this effect: 'After three weeks, the mother came back and said, "I did it, and it was not so bad". She told her mother-in-law, "I respect you, but this is my responsibility, so do not involve yourself in the education of my children"'. Much the same can be observed in the way graduates are asserting themselves in their marital relationships. A Studeničani Teacher summarised an overall shift in outlook as follows: 'All of the mothers tell me, "I will do more for myself and will not listen anymore to my husband, because I have my rights and my life, and I will put down the rules from now on". I think they will do it. … This is the first time they are standing up'. One of her MotherSchools pupils recalled how she had used her voice for the first time, and that her husband in turn opened the door and signalled that she was free to leave. Thus, although the shift in rebalancing power dynamics is indeed a long journey, graduates have taken significant strides forward, removing fear and finding the courage to use their voice. To put this in perspective, merely being permitted to attend the MotherSchools was considered a feat since, 'some of them needed to ask the husbands to come to the training and later told us that the husbands worried about us changing their minds and making them free women … [but] the positive influence made the husbands less worried about them attending'.

[44] 191211 MAC MSP ExRK 1 (Gostivar), Paragraph 28.
[45] 191209 MAC MST ExRK 2 (Tetovo), Paragraph 32.
[46] 191211 MAC MSP ExGN 1 (Gostivar), Paragraph 33; 201127 MAC MSP ExUK 2 (Saraj), Paragraph 161.

2.3 ADDRESSING FAMILIAL PUSH FACTORS BY UPGRADING PARENTING

> *You can be the push factor. You can't help that person who is in danger if you do not know how … If there is domestic violence from the father, that child will want to find shelter, will want to belong somewhere. If there is a cold home and the family structure is not strong, I think then those children are very much in danger of getting into extremist groups, because they want to feel they belong … I think it is hard to live with this fear. MotherSchools should have real schools in every country, because it helps women learn how to protect themselves and their children—from bad groups, from bad husbands. If you do not have communication with your child, I don't think you have information how this child feels and how he or she has problems …. We can be that push factor for the child; to make them go.*[47]
>
> *– MotherSchools Participant, Ljubin Group, Exit Interview*

While parents have the potential to shield youths from recruiters, their actions and inactions can likewise enhance susceptibly to radical influences. Mothers and fathers have the potential to act as a decisive push factor for several reasons. For one, adolescence is a tumultuous period in a child's life, and the absence of a secure family environment can accentuate feelings of isolation and insecurities in identity. The resulting void can be exploited by recruiters. Implementing relevant parenting methods to improve family dynamics, however, can significantly reduce the potency of recruitment tactics. To borrow a fitting metaphor from the MotherSchools manual, parents should be a 'lighthouse' to children navigating the high seas of puberty and young adulthood. On the one hand, youths ought to be free to venture out as they forge their own identities and paths. On the other hand, they should feel comfortable enough to return to harbour when they require support, guided by the shining light of the lighthouse. In this image, parents are present, communicative, and open yet by no means controlling—for lighthouses are constant fixtures that do not follow anyone around. In previous sections we explored how mothers worked to strengthen their own identities, confidence levels, and awareness of their potential role in security. The following section looks at how they built on their personal transformations to acquire and implement new parenting methods, restructuring toxic family dynamics and building more resilient homes in the process. Graduates succeeded for instance in replacing authoritarian with authoritative approaches. Their quest to become stronger pillars of stability and role models to their families was aided by a deeper practical understanding and application of parenting methods.

[47] 201126 MAC MSP ExRK 4 (Ljubin), Paragraph 126 – 130.

> *A violent home is a way of life … In a research study we conducted here, forty-three per cent of women we interviewed admitted they have been violated by the husband, mothers-in-law, or fathers-in-law. Especially the children are traumatised and will find any excuse to run away from the house. I worked with children at my school and have seen some who have problems—are more withdrawn, isolated in themselves … Those who are isolated do not talk at school or home and have problems expressing themselves … It usually happens when the father is violating the mother. Children are traumatised and unable to do schoolwork and creative things that every child does at this age... One factor is enough to push a child into radicalisation. There are children who are not connected with families, and this influences them, pushes them into radicalisation.*[48]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Gostivar Group, Entry Interview*

The baseline data produced ample evidence of family conditions and dynamics that amplify the vulnerability of children to toxic influences, with the presence of psychological and physical forms of violence figuring as the gravest familial push factor. An analysis of the entry data on the extent of psychological and physical violence within families demands applying a critical lens. Familial issues and violence emerged as a dominant taboo topic, and baseline interview answers by prospective participants thus need to be viewed with caution. These sensitivities are, among other things, inextricably linked to how mothers fear being blamed for the troubles of their children. Against the background of a resulting adherence to societal pressures, the denial of problems related to their children can thus at times be understood as the product of mothers attempting to keep up appearances, which the subsequent impact section will further corroborate. Yet a small number of prospective participants provided early clues on the extent of psychological and physical abuse within families across all communities of implementation. A mother from Tetovo contended that domestic violence was a pervasive issue plaguing 'every third family'. To her mind, this was severely impacting the development of children in her community. The isolating effect on girls was deeper, she found, 'because they get more closed'. While only a handful of mothers opened up, it emerged that the other MotherSchools communities were no less affected. In Gostivar, a future participant confirmed that 'there's a lot' of domestic violence in families, while a Čair mother said, 'In our family no, but in other families violence is common, especially violence against women; they don't understand that women have rights and freedoms as well'.[49] Mostly stating the issue to be external to their families, it nevertheless shone through that the issue was

[48] 190919 MAC MST EnRK 1 (Gostivar), Paragraph 31 – 34.
[49] 190919 MAC MSP EnUK 4 (Gostivar), Paragraph 57 – 58; 200213 MAC MSP EnMO 4 (Cair), Paragraph 64.

cloaked in silence and widespread. Elaborating on the severe impact that witnessing domestic abuse was having on youths within the community, a future Teacher from Tetovo explained, 'We can feel and we see it in their behaviour … emotionally they are broken … those kids in the future are potential candidates to suffer from trauma and depression … many of them start to behave like a criminal and end up in more danger. It is a problem for the kids because they see the future with hate and frustration'.[50] While violence against children as a form of discipline appeared to be less common, one mother related how her husband used to beat their child, while another said she had done so in the past.

A consideration of the methods that participants employ suggests that although most had a rudimentary understanding of parenting concepts, mothers with pubescent children frequently expressed feeling overwhelmed, apprehensive, and helpless. Communication disconnects were among the most prevalent issues. The entry data exposes a strong set of clusters of basic universal parenting concepts, including listening and maintaining an emotional proximity to children. On the surface, families appear to be relatively peaceful and functional. Yet a clear rift between the intentions and capacity of mothers to deal with the developmental phases of children in a contextualised manner became intensely apparent. 'They want to give them everything', a Tetovo Teacher explained, 'but when it is time to give advice or talk, they do not … it is more important to have a clean house than to have a conversation with the child'.[51] Since neglect tends not to be as visible in the identity and behaviours of children prior to puberty, analysing the responses and concerns of the cohort of mothers with teenagers is particularly informative. Technology in a high number of cases appeared to be the source of concern or blame. 'Previously we had a lot more communication and now he is avoiding me a lot. I am concerned about this; he is constantly on his mobile', a mother from Tetovo explained.[52] A future Saraj participant was even less certain on how to educate her children in an increasingly online-oriented world: 'I would like to learn how to make the children stay away from the computers and the phones; they are so addicted to the technology'. The violent video games, she revealed, made one of her sons irritable and angry, 'and now he has trouble speaking'. Yet her attempts at remedying the situation—confiscating their devices—has elicited angry responses, leaving her to conclude, 'I don't know what else to do; I have no other choice'.[53] In general, those mothers

[50] 190918 MAC MST EnRK 5 (Tetovo), Paragraph 38 – 44.
[51] 190917 MAC MST EnRK 2 (Tetovo), Paragraph 16.
[52] 190917 MAC MSP EnRK 5 (Tetovo), Paragraph 24.
[53] 200212 MAC MSP EnUK 5 (Saraj), Paragraph 11.

who did speak openly about their concerns expressed feeling limited in their ability to find solutions. The possible reasons cited were typically external like technology or a 'mystery' that speaks to a lack of understanding about developmental psychology and constructive communication ('I don't know what she has but when I talk to her, I don't know her mind very well').[54] However, parents failed to see that simply shutting down their children's gadgets would not yield the desired results, for 'you cannot control them; they can always access the internet and be attracted'.[55] Moreover, as a future Teacher contended, this virtual isolation was often a symptom in and of itself. 'They do not speak in the family—they have a lack of communication—because they see that families are not interested in their problems … Mothers just say, "my son is so aggressive, I do not know what to do". But if you analyse it then you see that it is about a lack of communication in the family'.[56]

As such, mental health issues and deviant behaviours of children, as a participant who works as a school psychologist explained, were not just widespread, but also the result of parenting deficits: 'The most frequent cases we have with the boys is during their phase of puberty when they start to misbehave and are aggressive, and the parents don't know how to deal with them'.[57] The entry answers also support this observation, and many cited having run out of ideas to address these issues—changes in the behaviour of their children and anxieties over protecting them effectively—as the main reason for joining the programme. Despite being aware and vocal that they had 'started losing the communication' with their children and become 'afraid and fearful that they [their children] might take the wrong path', responses tended to lack a sense of personal agency and pointed to a limited understanding of parenting methods and concepts.[58]

COMMUNICATIVE & PEACEFUL FAMILIES | MOTHERSCHOOLS IMPACT

> *I want to be real with you and tell you that my children said I have changed completely. It's because we did not have these methods here before and I studied so much … My daughter is now getting into puberty, and I realised how before MotherSchools I used to pay more attention to cleaning the house and issues that made me feel guilty because of the community. … I live with my husband's parents, so when guests were coming … I did not*

[54] 200213 MAC MSP EnGN 2 (Čair), Paragraph 44 - 47
[55] 190918 MAC MST EnRK 5 (Tetovo), Paragraph 32.
[56] 190918 MAC MST EnRK 5 (Tetovo), Paragraph 16 – 18.
[57] 200212 MAC MSP EnUK 2 (Saraj), Paragraph 11.
[58] 200213 MAC MSP EnLK 4 (Čair), Paragraph 35; 200213 MAC MSP EnMO 2 (Čair), Paragraph 46.

play with my own kids because I thought it is shameful … but now I try to spend more time with my kids and make them a priority.[59]

– MotherSchools Graduate, Saraj Group, Exit Interview

In stark contrast to the baseline discussions, mothers disclosed how previously they had applied harsh forms of disciplining like shouting and beating but are now abandoning these methods in favour of open communication. Applying critical thinking and inclusive techniques in lieu of fear tactics is aiding mothers to strengthen familial trust, broach important taboo topics including radicalisation, and to thus position themselves as trusted authority and safeguarding figures within their homes. A seismic shift in communication styles emerged from a consideration of the impact interviews. The qualitative data analysis points to a significant cluster around graduates in Studeničani and Gostivar who purportedly have stopped applying force as a means of disciplining their children. 'Mothers said that they had slapped sometimes their children but that they now try to be less violent and give more attention through talking, communication' a Gostivar Teacher recounted.[60] Marked improvements on multiple levels can be observed beyond exhibiting a readiness to shed the silence around parenting issues and removing elements of family violence. Most strikingly, a shift in critical and conceptual thinking has happened: 'For example', a Studeničani graduate explained, 'I knew that violence is not a way to treat children, but now that I know the consequences of violence, I would never think of that'.[61] In similar terms, a participant suggested having abandoned 'slapping or hitting' her children upon understanding that this 'can cause violence and trauma'.[62]

Indeed, heightened awareness around conceivable long-term consequences of authoritarian methods has infused the notion of parenting methods and responsibilities with new meaning. 'Before, I was very aggressive in physical ways to my children', another graduate noted, 'but now I see the role of me as a mother to educate them'.[63] That children will mirror the behaviour of their parents likewise is a conclusion that many mothers have reached, namely that 'the problem starts from the family' and 'if a parent is abusive for example, the child will also be abusive', in the words of a Gostivar mother.[64] In Studeničani, one of the Teachers contended that by and large the graduates had 'started to change and not to hit their

[59] 201126 MAC MSP ExRK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 90.
[60] 191211 MAC MST ExRK 2 (Gostivar), Paragraph 55.
[61] 191210 MAC MSP ExUK 2 (Studeničani), Paragraph 81.
[62] 191210 MAC MSP ExMO 3 (Studeničani), Paragraph 39.
[63] 191210 MAC MSP ExMO 1 (Studeničani), Paragraph 33.
[64] 191211 MAC MSP ExUK 1 (Gostivar), Paragraph 43.

children so much', opting instead for a conversational, problem-solving approach to uncover 'what' the problem may be and 'why' it has surfaced. Listening became a powerful asset of their toolkit ('I have learned that yelling is not the solution; I have to listen and understand their problem').[65]

Upgraded and nuanced communication styles within families gave way to family conversations around radicalisation and other sensitive topics, fostered the independence and readiness of youths to reflect critically on these issues, and in a few instances even alerted mothers to their children's personal experience with or nascent attraction to the idea of extremism. Whereas 'before they did not talk about radicalisation', a plethora of impactful case study examples materialised highlighting the mothers' decisiveness to bring their awareness of radicalisation to the kitchen table in a reflective manner.[66] 'I spoke about extremism with my sons last night', a Saraj graduate began. Instead of pressing upon them moral judgements, she proceeded to guide them through the process. 'I do not start with, "Did you see what happened? This is a bad thing" but used examples like, "Did you see what happened? What do you think about it?" … The topic that I have spoken about with my kids is about Albanians that they were part of ISIS, and now they are returning'. After she showed a YouTube video to her children about youths of the same age who had gone to Syria and returned traumatised, the mother gave them space to arrive at their own conclusions before starting a discussion: 'I learned in the MotherSchools to not say that is bad or wrong, but to give them the space to see how they react; how will they distinguish the good from the bad'.[67] In so doing, as other mothers also discovered, adolescents are afforded the space to express themselves freely and foster their own identities within a safe environment.

Furthermore, through a more open culture of communication, graduates are plugging information gaps with their sons and daughters, which has alerted them to possible dangers or misconceptions. In this vein, a Notetaker recalled how 'one mother said that she spoke with her children about radicalisation and her son said that if he didn't have a family he would go because he thought it was about Islam, but the mother explained the issue'.[68] In what amounted to a comparably surprising discovery, a Čair graduate learned that her second son apparently had dissuaded a classmate from going down an extremist path. As she recounted, her son at high school 'had a friend in his class who was in a radical Islamic group, and he told my son

[65] 191210 MAC MST ExRK 2 (Studeničani), Paragraph 56; 191210 MAC MSP ExUK 1 (Studeničani), Paragraph 108.
[66] 191210 MAC MST ExRK 2 (Studeničani Teacher), Paragraph 73
[67] 201125 MAC MSP ExLK 2 (Saraj), Paragraph 151 – 153.
[68] 191209 MAC MSN ExMO 2 (Studeničani), Paragraph 93.

all the time, “I will behead you, because you are not a faithful Islamic follower”. But he managed to get this guy away from these groups … he is no longer in the radical group’. The son only told his mother after learning that she had joined the MotherSchools. Now however, as she stated, ‘in my family we talk a lot about extremism and teach them how to stay away’ and ‘I shared this with the group because we have to talk about these problems at home and be aware’.[69]

Beyond strengthening the emotional and intellectual bond with their children, mothers report to have improved their marital relationships and in some cases are succeeding in enlisting their husbands as security allies at home. With mothers now more confidently asserting their voice and disseminating knowledge, husbands who had previously acted as an obstacle to the efforts and wellbeing of their wives are becoming more engaged and receptive of the Parenting for Peace philosophy. Towards the end of their MotherSchools journey, participants became aware that they tended to shoulder the bulk of the burden when it came to their children, realising that ‘if their children would do something wrong, it is usually the mothers that are blamed’.[70] To turn the tide, one mother, for instance, ‘told her husband that both of them are doing something wrong and asked him for help with the children, and now her husband goes outside with their children and gives them advice’.[71] Many graduates indeed find that they are inspiring tangible and noticeable behavioural changes in their husbands. Common statements underlining this shift include, ‘He is more involved in housework because we had the session on how to involve fathers, and he is now helping more as I started to advise him and include him in things, and he is with children more too, and I am noticing a change; we are starting to change’.[72] Graduates have begun to sensitise fathers to their potential as well (‘Some mothers also said they involved more their husbands in communication. One mother with young children said her husband would never pay attention to the son, but now—with her communication strategy—she managed to get him to listen to the boy. She passed this skill on: “I am teaching him also what we learned here”’).[73] In the hopes of bringing their husbands further into the fold, mothers have also managed to make their partners amenable to the idea of joining a prospective Parenting for Peace programme. In Ljubin, a mother suggested, ‘He would want to attend FatherSchools, especially since I stood

[69] 201127 MAC MSP ExRK 2 (Čair), Paragraph 86.
[70] 191209 MAC MSN ExMO 2 (Studeničani), Paragraph 63.
[71] 191209 MAC MSN ExMO 2 (Studeničani), Paragraph 63.
[72] 201127 MAC MSP ExMO 3 (Čair), Paragraph 120.
[73] 191209 MAC MST ExRK 4 (Tetovo), Paragraph 38.

in front of him, and he saw with his own eyes how much I changed'.[74] Likewise, in Tetovo 'husbands started seeing the differences in their wives; they saw how mothers had changed and got curious'.[75]

Based on observing positive transformations in their wives, as became clear across all groups, fathers by and large now appear to be more amenable to putting in the necessary work, also with regards to ensuring that their children do not become or are not pushed further into isolation. The fact alone that mothers attended the weekly sessions put fathers in a position to start interacting and engaging more with their children ('He was used to me being with the kids always … he was concerned about how he was going to take care of the kids. I told him, "You are not going to go play cards on Wednesday and are going to stay home", and he said, "Okay!"').[76] Parents in effect are now working more closely as a united front and sharing a greater range of parenting and domestic duties.

[74] 201126 MAC MSP ExLK 4 (Ljubin), Paragraph 122 – 127.
[75] 191209 MAC MST ExRK 2 (Tetovo), Paragraph 59.
[76] 191211 MAC MSP ExMO 3 (Gostivar), Paragraph 64.

2.4 Rebuilding Community Resilience with Prevention Networks of Mothers

> *The day we had the session about extremism is exactly when it all happened [identifying a potential recruitment hub]. Thanks to the MotherSchools, I was more confident and could open my eyes towards these kinds of problems and could make a change. The early warning signs that I learned helped me to detect these problems. At the beginning, I was feeling scared. But with the help and courage—the mothers and teachers and you gave me support—that made me confident that I could do this. A lot of courage built up inside of me and now I will not stop.*[77]
>
> *– MotherSchools Participant, Tetovo Group, Exit Interview*

Direct action and sustainable change at the local level requires graduates to transcend the safe space of their MotherSchools groups, and to disseminate their awareness and knowledge within their surroundings and beyond the familial context. To ultimately arrive at their community-wide prevention role, MotherSchools participants drew on their training and the group empowerment process that preceding impact sections have depicted. The process leading up to discovering and subsequently addressing possible manifestations and warning signs of youth radicalisation across the communities of implementation is captured in part by the above-cited interview excerpt. With respect to community resilience building, a clear impact chain emerges: participants first develop trusted support networks that boost confidence, go on to build awareness and absorb knowledge around prevention, begin to transcend the safe space to disseminate learnings and address taboos, and ultimately act on their ability to detect early warning signs of toxic influences at the community level. Acute situations that warrant intervention—as was the case in at least two communities—saw mothers strategise and execute coordinated individual and group action to remove possible recruitment hotspots.

Security Gaps & Limited Perspectives | Baseline Context

> *There is not much security in the schools, or there are not many activities in which kids can engage and places where they can go—a tough city for youth here. Drugs and alcohol are very common here in Tetovo. The youth is very much at risk of this; it happens a lot. We talked about the places they go to and people they meet, how they use steps and manipulate them that are all steps that can go towards radicalisation.*[78]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Tetovo Group, Entry Interview*

[77] 191212 MAC MSP ExRK 5 (Tetovo), Paragraph 73.
[78] 191209 MAC MST EeRK 3 (Tetovo), Paragraph 67

Across the board, prospective participants painted a bleak picture of their country and community environments, holding the view that North Macedonian youths were offered limited perspectives and inadequate support by the state. **When contemplating the prospects of the new generation, mothers conveyed deep mistrust towards institutions on the one hand, and little faith in community-level engagement on the other hand.** A strong sense prevailed that the country increasingly had been failing the new generation, and that conditions were further deteriorating. A fractured system appeared to be a chief concern. 'The worst part of this country is that it is very badly corrupted, and its institutions are too', a mother from Saraj explained.[79] Participants pointed out a deep-seated pillarization of society along political lines, namely that doling out of positions based on party allegiance was common practice. This in turn made career prospects highly dependent on connections and affiliations. 'I really have empathy for all the young people that actually get educated but cannot find a job', a mother explained, noting that 'the only way for them to get employed is by being involved in political parties or actions'.[80] The sense prevailed that the political system 'has given a lot of bad direction to the children' and that upon graduating from school or university 'all they have is being on the street and wasting their time … they start stealing or find other ways to get money, start using drugs; they are not able to make decisions about their lives'.[81] Beyond worrying about the prospects of their own children, interviewees recounted being likewise affected ('When I applied for a job, nobody responded because I was not on any political party list').[82] In contemplating potential solutions, several mothers endeavoured to either prepare their children for a future abroad or move their families elsewhere, with Germany being the preferred destination for most. An apparent lack of opportunities instilled the fear in mothers that children in their communities were highly prone to going down the wrong path.

Overall, the entry conversations revealed that children were at considerable risk of falling victim to radical influences due to lacking community cohesion, an apparent neglect of safeguarding efforts, and poor socio-economic conditions. An absence of prevention and intervention mechanisms, networks, and actors in most towns made this void in security especially obvious. Probing the Participants' sense of their children's future and security in their neighbourhoods often provoked fatalistic responses that were characterised

[79] 200212 MAC MSP EnLK 4 (Saraj), Paragraph 71.
[80] 200212 MAC MSP EnLK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 64.
[81] 200212 MAC MSP EnLK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 64.
[82] 190918 MAC MSP EnLK 3 (Tetovo), Paragraph 60.

by uncertainty, disillusionment, and hopelessness. A mother remarked, 'Tetovo is in God's hands, to be honest—I told the director "I need you to do something, because I want my children to be at school and not on the street"'.[83] Two others were altogether defeatist and at a loss in their assessment of the root problems, with one referring to the dire situation as 'the devil's work' and another suggesting that children 'are being stimulated by forces we do not know and that are really strong'.[84] These types of answers can be understood as a product of a missing and functioning prevention infrastructure. Mothers were unable to provide examples of places to which or actors to whom they could turn about their concerns over the security of their children. In considering the question of points of contact for support, future participants generally believed that 'there is no such organisation that will help them stay away from these groups'.[85] That most of the neighbourhoods and villages of implementation have been left to their own devices becomes apparent when one considers how, as in the case of Studeničani, many do not even have a police presence. Since the MotherSchools programme is implemented in isolated and harder-to-reach neighbourhoods and communities that tend previously not to have been engaged with P/CVE programming, responses such as 'I don't know any people who work on preventing extremism' and 'the prime minister should do more to prevent extremism' were by no means unexpected.[86]

ROBUST NETWORKS & UPROOTED HOTSPOTS | MOTHERSCHOOLS IMPACT

> *Mothers are now brave to speak and brave to take action … They said, "When we are united, we feel stronger to take action". They realise that creating networks is important. They had neighbours nearby, and they started to know each other better; they said they did not have time for each other before and only greeted each other. Now, they know how to create networks. They also said that schools should have extra activities not just for the children but also for the parents, and the children will feel more important, they think, if this happens.*[87]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Saraj Group, Exit Interview*

The mothers of North Macedonia have begun harnessing their confidence and competence training beyond familial settings, overcoming perceived limits to their changemaker potential in the process. They are actively positioning themselves as

[83] 190917 MAC MSP EnUK 4 (Tetovo), Paragraph 163.
[84] 200213 MAC MSP EnMO 3 (Čair), Paragraph 70; 190919 MAC MST EnLK 1 (Gostivar), Paragraph 89 – 90.
[85] 190918 MAC MSP EnLK 2 (Tetovo), Paragraph 31 – 32.
[86] 191212 MAC MSP ExES 5 (Tetovo), Paragraph 49.
[87] 201123 MAC MST ExRK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 45.

security stakeholders, broaching the taboo topic of violent extremism and disseminating knowledge around parental safeguarding techniques and responsibilities at the community level. 'We will think differently', a Tetovo Teacher began when alluding to the group's changes in attitudes and perceptions. Capturing the shift from working on 'the Self' towards developing a wider societal role in security, she elaborated, 'This project has changed a lot for me and the mothers, and now we will make a change in our community … We are becoming a messenger to other people … to make them aware and understand'.[88] A large part of this perception shift is owed to the realisation among graduates that their roles as parents and community members are interconnected. 'I realised', a Ljubin participant said, 'we are a part of the peacebuilding', and it 'helped me become more global in a way… before the MotherSchools my opinion of motherhood was really local, tiny' and restricted to 'me and my kids'.[89] As such, being aware of and active architects of their environments became a new priority, seeing that 'radicalisation or any other process is connected to the surrounding; what's happening around them'.[90] Furthermore, where previously the realisation of personal safeguarding-related parenting deficits had led to expressions of hopelessness and regret, mothers are shedding their despondency and moving towards a solutions-oriented outlook. Having identified previous parenting mistakes with her own children and referring to her security role, a Ljubin graduate stated how she is adamant on now alerting her grandchildren to the early warning signs and creating a trusted and close relationship that allows for difficult conversations: 'I am now ready to pass this knowledge on to my grandchildren'.[91] The graduates' energised optimism, as became clear, has moved the importance of the generational dimension in building community resilience more decidedly into view.

Moving from awareness to action, mothers reported on how they are speaking openly about the issue of extremism and radicalisation at the community level for the first time in their lives. 'They learned that they have power in the community. … In the end, the mothers concluded that they started to talk about some topics that were considered taboo topics in their families and communities, and one of those topics was radicalisation and extremism', a Čair Teacher summarised.[92] Each group's MotherSchools alumnae network is acting as a point of departure, motivating graduates to bring the Parenting for Peace philosophy and learning deeper into communities. Common statements to this effect included, 'I also discussed what

[88] 191209 MAC MST ExRK 4 (Tetovo), Paragraph 73.
[89] 201125 MAC MSP ExMO 3 (Ljubin), Paragraph 74.
[90] 201125 MAC MSP ExMO 3 (Ljubin), Paragraph 74.
[91] 201126 MAC MSP ExLK 4 (Ljubin), Paragraph 109.
[92] 201124 MAC MST ExRK 2 (Čair), Paragraph 46.

I've learned during the sessions outside my group—with my colleagues and other friends' by sharing, for instance, 'signs that we can detect from an earlier on stage'.[93] One mother made it a habit to approach neighbours she felt lacked awareness, saying 'Do not let your children get in these radical groups, and observe the signs—because there are signs they show'.[94] By virtue of an everyday proximity to children and other mothers, graduates with daytime teaching or counselling jobs proved to be especially effective in swiftly assuming their new position as security stakeholders. Anticipating that 'the MotherSchools will have a big influence on my community', a Saraj graduate noted, she explained how she had already begun to use her influence as a trusted teacher to disseminate awareness and knowledge: 'My colleagues from my school would call me every Thursday and would ask me what we did at the MotherSchools ... I would post the topics on my social media, and most of the mothers I know were interested and would comment and call me to ask me what we learned'.[95] Those who had not yet put their awareness-raising skills to the test—most notably mothers from the second round of MotherSchools who completed the programme during the pandemic—expressed feeling confident that they would do so in person once restrictions were lifted ('We as mothers who have attended will have a bigger impact to share awareness and raise awareness, to help other mothers who have teenagers').[96]

Graduates are employing their new networks of mothers to uproot networks of radicals in their surroundings. Whereas all groups succeeded in detecting toxic influences, some have even proceeded to take individual and coordinated group action to address apparent manifestations like recruitment hotspots operating in their town. By the end of their MotherSchools training, participants demonstrated that they are ready and able to take on their new security role. Indeed, the main ingredients have now been put in place: a mixture of heightened self-confidence, the consolidation of a trusted network, and deeper knowledge of the early warning signs. As previously discussed, mothers no longer deny or shy away from speaking about extremism in their communities. Once the taboo topic was broken down, they began to identify possible radical influences and networks that they perceived to have infiltrated the community and that were targeting their children. In fact, several mothers have already mobilised community members and addressed possible hotspots of radicalisation. In the words of a Notetaker, 'We discussed recruiters that operate in our territory and some

[93] 201127 MAC MSP ExUK 2 (Saraj), Paragraph 165.
[94] 201127 MAC MSP ExRK 2 (Čair), Paragraph 94.
[95] 201126 MAC MSP ExRK 3 (Saraj), Paragraph 137 – 138.
[96] 191212 MAC MSP EXR 5 (Tetovo), Paragraph 85 – 87.

mothers have been in direct contact with them. Some had family members who were part of manipulative radical groups … and with our group support they achieved to fix and to help adolescents withdraw from the radical group'.

To more tangibly illustrate how mothers are becoming the first line of defence against radical influences in their communities, this last of the impact sections concludes with the below case study example, as recalled by the graduates of a MotherSchools group. In Tetovo, two mothers identified a possible recruitment hub operating in their neighbourhood, which appeared to be targeting the youth in their town by offering free daytime supervision and overnight stays. Owing to MotherSchools group discussions and training around the early warning signs of radicalisation, the group began to put together the pieces: one mother who works as a school psychologist noticed that some of her students had become withdrawn; another participant then recalled how she had come across the alleged recruiters at her office. Together, the mothers began to investigate the matter, engage community stakeholders and affected parents. Their actions ultimately ensured that parents began to withdraw their children from the dubious organisation and dormitory operating in their town. For the sake of clarity, the following includes a condensed and streamlined version of the narrative, as told through the perspective of the Tetovo Notetaker:

> *One of the mothers overheard a conversation between an employee and two foreign sounding men who were promoting their NGO in Tetovo. They said they help children with difficulties and give lectures about Islam. They teach children how to pray, go to the mosque, and how to be independent. 'I got angry', the mother said. 'When I got out', she said, 'I asked them, what attracts me to take my girl there?' They said, 'Free transport, we take them to school, bring them to the organisation after school and they will have 3 hours of tuition. All of this for five working days, they sleep there during the week, and all this for 500 dinars per month'. This made her suspicious. The parents she talked to said, 'We registered the kids there because they do not study at home and listen to us. They will be more prepared and listen to us more. The good news is that it is very cheap. They will learn about religion there, too'. The parents do not know what happens. Do they do something else there? Will it turn out the way we had our suspicions? Also, there is another NGO with the same name in a village near Tetovo. There are a lot of students who go there and sleep there. During school days. And in the morning, they go to mosque. Where the Imam is.*
>
> *Another mother in the group, a psychologist at a primary school, then picked up this story, because she noticed that they had come across the same NGO. At work the other week, the principal called her in because they had issues with students who were not concentrating. She went to observe them in class. It was like they had not slept at all during the night. She called them to the office to talk to them, one by one. The elder of two brothers said, 'I attend a course after school. We learn about religion. There is a room with PlayStation where we can play all night. That is why I am sleepy, because maybe I have slept two hours and then we go to mosque and pray. My parents registered us. There are a lot of students in this school. Even the best students'. After that she called the father to see why he would let his sons go there. And the father said, 'I have not finished high school, I am unemployed. I am not sufficiently prepared to help my kids. They do not do their homework. That is why I suppose this a good opportunity for them. The plus is that they can learn about religion'. The father thought that this way their sons could achieve more in life and be someone. The psychologist then offered him a deal, that she would find him a job if he took the sons out of the NGO. The following session we learned that the father broke off the relationship with the organisation and accepted the deal.*

> *The mothers were shocked and surprised. It is a taboo. We maybe have heard about similar cases but we have never sat down and talked about these things. We see that the mothers have more interest in helping the psychologist and helping the other mother to get to the bottom of this. The children are very young and vulnerable. The one is 13; one is 11. We talked about the reasons why adolescents and even adults join these kinds of groups. The child centre NGO came up again in the most recent session. The mothers had investigated this already. One mother took a picture of the working hour list. This was at 1pm on Saturday. It was closed. She said she would go there again next week. The other mothers also investigated, as did the teacher. This centre is registered and has a location here in Tetovo and looks stable on paper. All documents are in order in the central municipality. The mothers still insist that they need to know more and get to the bottom of this. They always say that they will go together. They have discovered their detective side.*[97]

Whereas divergent and similar impact stories could be observed in the other groups, the Tetovo group's is a textbook example of how self-confident MotherSchools participants apply their newly acquired understanding of the early warning signs in real time. It speaks to a number of issues that MotherSchools address: the deep silence around community threats to children; a lack of awareness and confidence on the part of parents in the community, especially with respect to their parenting roles and responsibilities; limited parent-child communication; and the passing on of parental duties to individuals who have many of the markings of recruiters, no matter the intention or ideology.

[97] Please note that this is a condensed version of the story recounted by the Tetovo Notetaker during a weekly monitoring call. Lengthier and more detailed Exit Interview accounts by the school psychologist herself and one of the MotherSchools Teachers are available upon request. The author of this report has opted to include this narrative, since it provides a more global albeit less complete version of events. It later emerged, for instance, that the school psychologist had mobilised a whole range of other community stakeholders, including the school's director and the municipality.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

> *Before the MotherSchools, mothers did not have this space. They said, "Now we have a voice; our opinion is valuable". And they said, "We have not been very aware about our children". They thought about creating networks and creating more awareness at school. They said that they need more projects like the MotherSchools in the municipality, especially for women. They all agreed that women are not seeing themselves involved in projects, especially like the MotherSchools concept. And fathers also… they think we should do the FatherSchools in Saraj, because there is a big need. It will be very hard at first, because the fathers are very macho here. To start, like the first MotherSchools, it took some time to find mothers. But now a huge number joined and more want to join. They think that it should be in every village connected to Saraj. They want to open an organisation in Saraj for women.*[98]
>
> *– MotherSchools Teacher, Saraj Group, Exit Interview*

As this impact report has shown, participants are now addressing and overcoming real and imagined barriers standing in the way of their soft power security role. The first evident steps participants took included working on their self-confidence and mustering the courage to embrace their potential, leading some to reduce family violence and others to address possible signs of radicalisation in their communities. When viewed against their baseline point of departure, mothers have taken steps to translate into practice their knowledge and awareness of how parents can play a pivotal role in safeguarding their children and advance community cohesion. With a view to the future, Women without Borders also considered the monitoring data and compiled graduate feedback to gauge how future engagement could capitalise on the capacity and momentum that WwB has built through its many MotherSchools programme iterations across North Macedonia since 2016. The three main recommendations are:

1. **Expanding fathers-related session theme and/or implementing FatherSchools**

   The impact data clearly found that many men in North Macedonia communities of implementation are a chief barrier to the personal development of their wives and children alike. Their push-factor potential has also long been observed, with domestic violence being a common occurrence in families and driver of children as witnesses to the abuse. As such, children can become more isolated or indeed later mirror the behaviour of their fathers. While WwB built into the curriculum a whole session addressing the topic of engaging fathers and husbands, several graduates found the session to be so useful that they recommended it be expanded upon. Summarising the general group sentiment, a Teacher suggested, 'The session about fathers was very useful; you should expand on this in the manual'.[99] All groups, including hers, recommended that any follow-up engagement should not fail to include FatherSchools

[98] 201123 MAC MST ExRK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 35.
[99] 201123 MAC MST ExRK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 92

programming. When asked if their own husbands would attend, the majority appeared optimistic. 'Especially the husbands of those mothers would attend', the Ljubin Notetaker explained, 'because they already have an idea of the benefits of these workshops'. She put it down to the MotherSchools-effect: 'People have become more open-minded and encouraged, and more emotionally intelligent. They gained soft skills and it is reflected in all the families'.[100] Since WwB has been implementing FatherSchools for around five years now, this type of engagement would indeed be feasible and a logical next step towards building a whole-of-family security architecture in North Macedonia.

2. **Implementing in more isolated and at-risk communities**

WwB's long-term presence through MotherSchools programming in North Macedonia is proof that previously inaccessible or hard-to-reach communities can be engaged in due time. Without the vast network of North Macedonian stakeholders and graduates at all levels that WwB has built since 2016, a successful mobilisation of participants in isolated communities like Studeničani would have been improbable. By contrast, first generation MotherSchools iterations in new countries of implementation typically focus on establishing the programme by, inter alia, ensuring contextualisation, securing stakeholder buy-in at all levels, building trusted relationships on the ground, and developing the necessary local capacity to expand to more at-risk or affected communities in the future. For WwB, going even deeper into isolated communities is therefore most feasible in a country like North Macedonia, where MotherSchools programming efforts have built sufficient capacity and expansive networks. A cluster of recommendations around this type of expansion emerged in Saraj. Several graduates recommended that mothers from more remote villages connected to Saraj needed to be engaged. One mother also suggested that the readiness and enthusiasm was there: 'I held a meeting with the mothers in the school where I work, and I told them how the MotherSchools affected me, and I think it also impacted them … They asked if it will be held in the countryside also, because they are quite far from Saraj; they said they wanted to be part of this'.[101] As one the Saraj Teachers concluded, 'There's a need in our villages … it would be good to do one strategic plan for all villages in Saraj'.[102]

3. **Leveraging the local and global capacity of the MotherSchools Network**

Like many other educational programmes, the MotherSchools conclude with a graduation ceremony. This marks their more definite point of departure as changemakers; graduates go on to implement their new knowledge in a contextualised manner. In employing their new networks of likeminded women and a set of new skills and concepts, graduates apply their learnings and experiences to their everyday lives, and thus within their family, community, and work environments. When viewed through a generational lens, this impact unfolds over the years and decades. As the programme has already seen mothers go on to harness their community resilience building roles, the resulting momentum should be supported to accelerate and amplify the capacity that has been built. There are a number of possible way to leverage this built capacity, for example through 'MotherSchools ambassador programmes' that

[100] 201124 MAC MSN ExRK 1 (Ljubin), Paragraph 74.
[101] 201126 MAC MSP ExRK 3 (Saraj), Paragraph 91.
[102] 201124 MAC MST ExLK 1 (Saraj), Paragraph 489.

connect individuals who have shown exceptional commitment with government stakeholders and other CSOs in the field of prevention. Also worthwhile and possible would be to consider convening MotherSchools alumnae across the sixteen country chapters through a virtual exchange. These examples serve to illustrate how the capacity built through the MotherSchools could be further leveraged on the local and global levels.

ABOUT MOTHERSCHOOLS

Mothers have long presented a missing link in preventing the spread of violent extremism. Their unparalleled physical and emotional proximity make them witnesses of every stage in their child's development. While mothers have the potential to intervene in the initial stages of the radicalisation process, often they lack the essential knowledge and self-confidence to recognise and address the warning signs in their sons and daughters. Women without Borders (WwB) began introducing the notion of Mothers Preventing Violent Extremism (MPVE) in the context of its SAVE (Sisters Against Violent Extremism) network of projects and initiatives from 2008. Responding to its research study findings from surveys and interviews with 1023 mothers across five countries, WwB developed and designed the pioneering 'MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace' Model. When put into practice, this bottom-up prevention approach positions concerned and affected mothers as the first line of defence in at-risk communities. The curriculum strengthens the participant's individual capacity, capability, and emotional literacy, and heightens her awareness of radical influences. WwB has been advancing local and regional security through contextualised iterations of the programme, and to date has engaged over two thousand mothers in sixteen countries across Western and Eastern Europe; Central, South, and Southeast Asia; the Middle East; and Sub-capacity by providing civil society stakeholders in at-risk regions with the essential structures, tools, and skills to address and counteract extremist ideologies. Owing to its proven track record, WwB's MotherSchools Model has emerged as a recognised good practice and contributed to rethinking and reshaping countering and preventing violent extremism (P/CVE) policy worldwide.