

W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

A RETURN TO TOLERANT AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES?

How family-based prevention work could be the glue to make preceding rehabilitation and reintegration strategies stick

A POLICY PAPER BY RAFAEL KROPIUNIGG

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THE POLICY GAP.

Current P/CVE policies around the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and their families have overlooked and underestimated the important role that communities of origin and return play in successfully reintegrating FTFs and supporting preceding efforts. Resilient and tolerant communities are a dual need with a dual purpose. On the one hand, if communities are not sufficiently prepared and aware of the early warning signs, the reintroduction of radical ideologies is foreseeable. Concurrently, ongoing radicalisation unrelated to returnees can go unnoticed. On the other hand, where communities are intolerant, there is a distinct possibility that returnees could be pushed further to the margins of society, conceivably leading to a heightened risk of reengagement.



THE POLICY RECOMMENDATION.

This policy paper proposes that 'communities of origin and return' must be a part of the discussion and solution within the framework of a whole-of-society approach. We should therefore broaden the lens and recognise how prevention at the local level is a part of the reintegration and rehabilitation architecture. This requires talking to and engaging family members and communities more broadly to continue building resilience, encouraging informed tolerance, and advancing critical thinking. In so doing, the P/CVE community would work more closely with the very individuals who could either undo or be the ultimate glue that makes all preceding efforts stick.

GOVERNMENTS REHABILITATE; COMMUNITIES REINTEGRATE?

In recent years, P/CVE policy primarily has focused on ongoing challenges around returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and their families. Several central questions emerged as a result: how can we ensure that radical ideologies are not reintroduced, recidivism is avoided, and returnees have the best possible chance at becoming productive and constructive members of their respective societies? How will we support the process by which they can journey from the margins of society to potentially becoming role model citizens in their everyday lives—living and breathing counternarratives, even? And how do we

prevent the demonisation and marginalisation of those born into FTF families?

Despite the progress that has been made towards addressing these challenges, current strategies are falling short of a truly integrated and whole-of-society approach. One overlooked piece has been consistent community-based prevention. The missing conversation around so-called 'communities of origin' appears to be rooted in the assumption that prevention work is not relevant to the rehabilitation and reintegration process. Indeed, Women without Borders until recently had presumed prevention and reintegration to be separate and only loosely related. Our work with vulnerable communities, however, made it increasingly clear that the places to which many individuals are gradually returning have a stake and a role to play.

BRINGING PREVENTION BACK INTO THE FOLD

In places where reintegration and rehabilitation has moved to the top of CVE agendas—many of the places where Women without Borders has also continued to implement prevention programmes—we have seen that communities are ambivalent towards returnees. The topic is often shrouded in misinformation, fear, and silence. Through our 'MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace' programmes, we have nevertheless managed to capture serious mindset shifts towards critical thinking by deploying a structured and rigorous monitoring and evaluation approach to all of our programmes. It has made clear that engaging family members can prepare the ground and ultimately complement returnee-centric approaches.

The increased resilience and tolerance that we observed has been an unexpected impact finding of our implementations. The MotherSchools

Model itself is an educational prevention programme that provides confidence and competence training to groups of mothers of adolescent children who want to position themselves as safeguarding actors in their families and communities. Since we started the programme a decade ago, it has been rolled out across seventeen countries in three continents. The MotherSchools Model operates on the principle that peace starts at home, as does conflict. The curriculum employs developmental child psychology and practical parenting techniques and encourages a process of empowerment and taking on leadership in one's family and community. In sum, the parenting for peace programme builds networks of role models to stop networks of extremists in their tracks.

How does such a prevention programme matter in the context of returning families? While our implementation experiences in Kosovo can help to address this question, the Kosovar context also presents itself as a good case study. Kosovo not only witnessed one of Europe's highest per capita rates of FTF departures, it also led the way in repatriating a high number of returning fighters and their family members.

COMMUNITY AMBIVALENCE AND FEAR TOWARDS RETURNEES

Through pre-implementation interviews with future MotherSchools participants in Kosovo, Women without Borders identified several attitudinal community-level challenges to the long-term integration of returnees. Upon programme completion, we interviewed the same sixty participants to capture shifts in attitudes when participants graduated from the MotherSchools programme. Many participants came from vulnerable communities that had experienced high concentrations of FTF departures.

Prior to the start of the programme, as the MotherSchools baseline interviews revealed, prospective participants mostly were uninterested or suspicious about the possibility of repatriation and reintegration of former fighters and their families into their communities. An anxiety towards the topic clearly came to the fore. To cite one participant: 'We do not care about the returnees, and we should not take them back. I don't want them next door; I don't trust that they will not create secret groups again'. Another mother recalled a boy from her village who had left for Syria. In her words, 'he is dead to us'.

These pre-programme interviews in three communities that had witnessed a high number of individuals leave for Syria and Iraq suggested that there was not only a fear and uncertainty surrounding FTFs, but also no discernible community-level dialogue around the topic. The future participants' incomplete awareness and understanding of extremism was clearly feeding community-level fear, uncertainty, and a culture of intolerance towards the repatriation of returnees and their anticipated return.

TOWARDS A CULTURE OF RESILIENCE AND TOLERANCE

A year down the line, when Women without Borders conducted the MotherSchools impact interviews, we captured some considerable attitudinal shifts. In stark contrast to the pre-programme mindsets, many graduates appeared to have embraced a culture of tolerance and communication to counter the very polarisation that feeds cycles of extremism. Leaps in critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the issue became apparent. We found that most participants had reduced their prejudices and one-dimensional modes of thinking.

The experience of an open exchange of ideas within a trusted group setting worked to remove attitudes that tend to accentuate polarisation and marginalisation. This form of empowered dialogue encouraged the MotherSchools groups to discuss and reassess inherent biases, especially with respect to overcoming the tendency to define community members based solely on appearances. In contrast to the entry interviews, the participants also no longer rejected or condemned the returnees from Syria and Iraq outright. They became more open about being affected directly as well as willing to discuss this on a personal level. Graduates mentioned cases that they knew about, including own family members who had returned, some of whom were living in absolute isolation, rejected and ostracised by everyone they had known.

A reassessed stance towards reintegration emerged alongside a willingness to speak, suggesting that at least some now challenged attitudes that commonly lead to 're-marginalising the marginalised'. Two statements sum up this transition rather well. The MotherSchools, as one graduate said, 'taught me how to accept those who have tried something like this, and how to include them in society again ... Everyone can be a victim, and we need to think of a way to prevent this and bring them back in society'. Echoing this in comparable terms, another graduate said that the MotherSchools had taught her 'that we have to build this tolerant community where even if we are against something, at least they have their own rights, they have to live with their choices, and we have to be tolerant towards people—but not avoid our responsibility as community members: when we see something wrong, we need to discuss'.

THE DUAL PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY-BASED PREVENTION WORK

In drawing on insights from our fieldwork experience at Women without Borders, this policy paper has proposed that we must pay closer

attention to local-level developments and work upstream through prevention programming in order to fully reintegrate returnees and halt further cycles of extremism. Working towards building tolerant yet resilient communities is a dual need with a dual purpose. This is the contribution that prevention programmes can make to the broader rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. After all, the communities—the mothers, fathers, friends, teachers—are those to whom surviving FTFs and their families will likely, eventually return. Communities, therefore, can be the final roadblock or indeed the final pillar that makes reintegration a long-term success. In this view, community-based prevention can be the glue that makes preceding efforts stick.

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Women without Borders (WwB) is an international nonprofit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.