

Die Presse

After Villach: “The attacker goes to prison, but we have to live with the consequences.”

By Edit Schlaffer

Until Saturday, Austria’s southern alpine town of Villach was known mostly for its peaceful and tranquil daily life. The town is a stable social democratic stronghold in an otherwise largely traditionalist and deeply conservative province, or a “blueberry in the tomato soup” in analogous Texan terms. Last weekend, Villach’s longstanding sense of peace and continuity was shattered abruptly when a young man took to the main square and began stabbing pedestrians at random. Fortunately, the attacker did not get far: a nearby observer sprang into action and brought the attack to an end with the help of his car. As coincidence had it, the perpetrator and rescuer are both Syrian.

The two men also share a common past. Both fled the terror of their homeland and have lived in Villach for close to a decade. Shortly after saving the town from further bloodshed, the rescuer expressed his gratitude for having been afforded the opportunity at a new life in a safe community. But what of the perpetrator—what had put him on the path of hatred instead?

The Role of Mothers in Preventing Radicalisation

To understand and intervene in the radicalisation process, Women without Borders in 2012 launched MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace. The programme has been implemented worldwide across seventeen countries and only recently launched in Villach. This educational initiative brings together mothers of adolescent and young adults who are concerned about threats that they often feel are beyond their control—ranging from the allure of influencers to the effects of everyday discrimination. They want to be role models to their children—to safeguard them and strengthen their resolve during a critical time in their lives.

After the weekend, the group of participants from the Villach MotherSchools programme convened, as they do every week. The women are from Afghanistan and Syria. They are guided through the MotherSchools curriculum by local teachers trained by Women without Borders. The participants learn how to speak openly with their children about the taboo topic of extremism. They are encouraged to develop their own confidence so they can navigate this sensitive terrain. The mothers also learn to recognise early warning signs and to understand that they, as mothers, have a responsibility to maintain strong bonds with their children—to be an anchor in the turbulent years of adolescence.

And this is not easy. Many have internalised a patriarchal myth: the “I’m *just* a mother” notion. Yet precisely in this role, they are the missing link in a comprehensive security strategy. They

have both emotional access to their children and a finely tuned awareness of moments when their children may be at risk.

The Day After the Attack

A Villach MotherSchools session was scheduled for Monday, the day after the attack. The session's theme was on how to build a security pyramid and the role of families as the foundation of social cohesion. The atmosphere was filled with grief, anger, and fear. Sitting in a circle, the women spoke about how they had activated their networks, trying to find out if anyone had known the attacker or what might have motivated him. They are afraid—afraid of what happens next, of whether their asylum status might be jeopardised, of how their children will be treated at school.

Parents Cannot Abdicate Responsibility

At the same time, they understand why Austrians could be angry and afraid. They are grateful to have found one another through the MotherSchools—a space where they can come together in this traumatic moment. Here, at the offices of the organisation PIVA—Women without Borders' local implementing partner—they feel safe. And they are determined to find solutions.

Two women express their conviction that parents cannot abdicate responsibility when things go this far with their children. This is why they are here.

How will society respond? One woman puts it bluntly: “The attacker goes to prison, but we have to live with the consequences.” And what can we learn from this? Prevention requires trusted partners within families—partners who can withstand the digital world of radicalisation. Establishing a network of MotherSchools across the world would be a first step in harnessing the social capital of women to safeguard peace in uncertain times.

Dr. Edit Schlaffer is the founder of Women without Borders, an international NGO based in Vienna, Austria: wwb.org.

This article was originally published in German in the Austrian newspaper *Die Presse*. Read the original version [here](#).