



Good Practices and Challenges in Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women Returned from Syria and Iraq

Working Paper from Workshop Organized by the Bulan Institute on 19 th August 2022





INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an overview of the general approaches toward the repatriation and rehabilitation of female returnees implemented in three Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Discussing concrete examples of successful and multi-agency practices, the paper draws on a workshop organized by the Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations on 19 August 2022. The online workshop promoted an active exchange of good practices and knowledge between PRR practitioners, experts, diplomats, and researchers from the region and beyond, who were invited to attend the workshop and exchange on experiences, strategies, and best practices.

This working paper analyses the rehabilitation and reintegration of female returnees and the promising practices discussed during the workshop and concludes with an analysis of promising strategies and existing challenges. The paper seeks to contribute to the debate on how gendered experiences shape the exiting from an extremist movement as well as the reintegration into a peaceful and secular society. It does so by taking stock of the work carried out by expert practitioners in the region and analyzing the specific challenges encountered when working with female returnees. Finally, the paper presents practical recommendations on institutional cooperation, local level measures and individual approaches to be implemented in future programs and actions.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Among women returning to Central Asia from Syria and Iraq experiences vary greatly. Indeed, many ISIS-linked women returning from the Middle East might have been victims of different forms of violence and exploitation, while others might have committed crimes. Therefore, tailored strategies need to be implemented, since an approach limited to security and punishment would reveal to be inadequate when dealing with ISIS-affiliated women. The rehabilitation of female returnees has its peculiarities and poses various challenges to many UN member states. R&R practices of female returnees in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have drawn great attention from international experts and various lessons can be learned from the experiences of the Central Asian countries.

Key Highlights of the workshop included the following:

01.

The rehabilitation and reintegration of women and their children are long-term processes and demand sustained human and financial resources.

02.

Local-level rehabilitation programs must include multi-stakeholder approaches.

03.

The mobilization and training of frontline practitioners are of utmost necessity.

04.

Trust building and trust gaining between practitioners and beneficiaries is a cornerstone of successful rehabilitation and reintegration practices.

05.

Education and professional training organized for female returnees will open new doors and empower them to gain economic independence.

EXISTING GOOD AND PROMISING PRACTICES

Approaches to returning FTFs-linked women vary greatly among UN member states. Depending on the local context, such approaches are typically built on countries' legal frameworks and pre-existing initiatives, as well as on practitioners' experiences and networks. The four Central Asian countries under review have carried out unprecedented big-scale repatriation operations and have built innovative and promising R&R programs having no previous experience, overcoming new challenges and learning through practice. During the workshop, expert practitioners addressed five main thematic areas, as explained below.

Reception Phase

- Promising practices can be witnessed in the reception strategies of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Indeed, the reception of female returnees was carried out in all three countries by mobilizing practitioners from multiple fields. Rehabilitation centers were put in place, and within these centers, female returnees and their children were provided with medical care and emergency care.
- In Kazakhstan, for instance, all returnees were initially accommodated in a special rehabilitation center close to the Caspian Sea, where they stayed for 30 days. During this period, Kazakh practitioners provided medical and psychological screenings, as well as theological and social counseling. Social workers focused on improving female returnees' communication and socialization skills, theologians and religious leaders assessed their religious literacy and radicalization levels, and psychologists worked on PTSD symptoms, anxiety, and fear. The work was organized on two levels: both an individual and group level. After this initial 30-day long quarantine, female returnees were relocated to different towns in the country in which they previously lived and had family members.
- Similarly, to the Kazakh experience, female returnees in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were initially hosted in rehabilitation centers. Returnees in Tajikistan were placed in a special center located in Kharagon in the Varzob district. In the rehabilitation center, doctors, psychologists, social workers, and lawyers worked with the returned women and provided them with individualized support and rehabilitation programs.

Highlight n° 1: In Kazakhstan, during the pandemic-related lockdowns, Gulnaz Razdykova and her Center organized online professional training for 100 female returnees. Many international and national experts were involved in the workshops and training provided, and the entire organization was supported by groups of volunteering female returnees. Thanks to these training sessions, most beneficiaries found employment in the service sector or small businesses. In some successful cases, female returnees were even able to obtain grants and start their own independent business becoming employers themselves.

Partnership with Civil Society

- The inclusion of civil society organizations in rehabilitation programs is important as civil society organizations have the trust of the people, they have access to communities, and they have real local experience. For these reasons, a multi-stakeholder approach involving civil society actors is the right way forward toward the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of women. Civil society can indeed participate in rehabilitation and reintegration programs in various direct and indirect ways, namely by providing material and financial assistance to repatriated women.
- In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, dozens of civil society organizations have been involved in different phases of rehabilitation programs. This partnership made rehabilitation and reintegration programs more efficient as local NGOs have been providing women with legal assistance, social and educational rehabilitation as well as other services. It is also important to highlight, the essential role that has been played by UN agencies and international organizations, such as Hedayah, USIP, Search for Common Ground and the Bulan Institute. UNOCT, UNICEF, UNODC and UNDP have partnered with local NGOs to assess local needs and provide them with the necessary capacity-building support.

Highlight n°2: In Uzbekistan, civil society organizations such as Barqaror Hayot and Istiqlol Avlodi have been a part of the rehabilitation and reintegration of women and their children. They have restored their documents and organized professional courses for female returnees, as well as schooling and extra tutoring for children to reduce their educational gap. In Kazakhstan, several NGOs have taken a lead in creating and implementing comprehensive rehabilitation programs. Civil society organizations, such as Ak-niet, Pravo, Shans and Pavlodar Center have provided psychological, legal, medical, theological, and educational support to returnees.





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The Center for Human Rights also works with theologians and religious scholars, namely by providing them with training. Otherwise, the main contribution of international organizations consists of material and financial support or professional assistance to those organizations who provide these services to female returnees.

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Dr. Azizi Rustam, Deputy Director of the Center for Islamic Studies under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan

Education and Employment

- In Central Asia, an essential successful practice in the R&R of female returnees has been to provide education and professional training to these women, supporting them in their employment search and in achieving financial independence. In some cases, civil society organizations provided financial and material assistance for women who wanted to start independent small businesses.
- For example, some women returnees have received sewing kits and grants to start their businesses. In addition, education/training courses have proven to be successful in making women independent. Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have provided women returnees with education courses for free, this includes sewing classes, hairdresser and nails courses which can later be used to launch a business or find employment. Many women returned to Central Asia with their children, therefore ensuring financial independence through education and employment is key to a successful reintegration and rehabilitation program.

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Most women attended professional courses or were trained and retrained with follow up employment. Most of them currently work in the service sector and beauty salons. Some women even have business projects. They obtained grants and there were successful cases where women themselves become employers.

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Gulnaz Razdykova, director of the Center for Analysis and Development of Interconfessional Relations, Kazakhstan

Psychological and Social Aspects of Reintegration

- Post-traumatic stress is extremely frequent in women returning from Syria and Iraq, especially among those that have lost loved ones because of the conflict or due to the harsh living conditions under ISIS and in the detention camps in Northeast Syria. Various strategies have been implemented to deal with the psychological trauma of women returnees, among these, peer group therapy has been very successful. This is because it allows women to talk about their shared experiences with other female returnees of similar backgrounds. Women returnees can better understand one another as they understand what each woman has gone through in Iraq and Syria and what their experiences and traumas are.
- In Kazakhstan, female returnees have had access to constant psychological assistance. During the pandemic lockdown, psychologists in Kazakhstan launched a special project called “Zoom Zhusan” which provided online psychological assistance to female returnees. Both in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, women and children are monitored and assisted in their reintegration into normal life. The process involves a safe therapeutic environment where women are encouraged to express themselves, dialogue with their peers, and reflect on their individual and shared experiences. In Uzbekistan, rehabilitation programs are adapted to each returnee’s specific needs, thereby government practitioners develop specialized psychosocial support whose duration varies according to the needs of the beneficiary.

Ideological pillar of rehabilitation

- De-radicalization is an important component of rehabilitation and reintegration, but it has been a controversial matter. Some countries prefer to avoid having an ideological pillar in their rehabilitation and reintegration programs. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan has strong ideological pillar having mobilized and trained theologians and religious leaders to work with returnees. Kazakh theologians and imams were indeed allowed to visit prisons and talk to returnees providing them with spiritual support and counseling while explaining the difference between ISIS’s radical ideology and Islam. Kazakhstan involved women theologians and imams to make female returnees more comfortable and build trust and fruitful communication channels.

Highlight n° 3: In Kazakhstan, thanks to the work of imams and theologians in prisons, some female returnees have been freed ahead of their terms due to their successful de-radicalization and abandonment of the radical ideology. For example, some of them were sentenced to 5 years, but now 3 years have passed, and many women are already free and reunited with their children.



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The question is how do we assess if we have deradicalized a person or not? For this, our center has developed a scale with various criteria to be evaluated by expert practitioners working with returnees: are there changes in his/her religious views, in his/her manners of communication and social status, in his/her attitudes toward the State, towards the personnel of law enforcement agencies? Or elsewhere, are there changes in his/her attitudes towards the official Muslim clergy and the so-called traditional Islam in Kazakhstan? and finally, the experts assess the changes in the appearance of the person and whether he/she politicizes religion

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Alim Shaumetov, Expert of the Center of Information, Propaganda and Rehabilitation “Ak-niet”, Kazakhstan.



A Kazakh woman evacuated from Syria, a resident of Aqtobe, Kazakhstan, talks with a psychologist in a rehabilitation center, RFE/RL photo.



CHALLENGES IN WORKING WITH FEMALE RETURNEES

The most common challenge encountered by R&R practitioners in all Central Asian countries is a shortage of specialists and practitioners. The lack of human resources has been a major issue and it is still relevant to all countries. In many cases, practitioners are underpaid and suffer from burnout. Thus, after nearly 4 years of work in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, PRR practitioners need financial and professional support to continue working with returnees.

Another challenge is women's self-stigmatization and lack of trust in their future. Indeed, female returnees feel guilt for having gone to Syria and those among them who have lost their children and husbands feel additional guilt for having survived. Tremendous work must be done by psychologists and psychotherapists, thus there is an urgent need to secure stable funding for their indispensable work.

Implementing age and gender-sensitive approaches toward women is essential and remains challenging. Women and girls have experienced gender-based violence and were judged by gender-based assumptions. When it comes to R&R programs, it is important to address women and men separately since the motivations for joining ISIS were different, and the experience under ISIS and later life in Al-Hol camps were too.

“ You will never understand us, no one can understand our problems, none of you saw what we saw ”

Female returnee in Kazakhstan



PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

The following recommendations were offered in the meeting by practitioners working in R&R programs:

- Repatriating countries must consider developing media strategies to reduce stigmatization and inform the public about the R&R programs they carry out. For instance, Kazakhstan used mass media to overcome stigmatization in the public domain by promoting female returnees' rehabilitation experiences. Practitioners organized talk shows for returnees to speak up which helped decrease stigmatization. The more female returnees talked about their experience, the more public hostility decreased.
- It is important to involve civil society and local communities in the rehabilitation process. For instance, parent committees can be engaged, and sponsorship practices can be developed in communities, as has been done in Kazakhstan where female returnees were able to buy apartments thanks to sponsorships from their communities.
- Engaging women returnees as volunteers makes an essential contribution to their and their peers' rehabilitation. Practitioners in Kazakhstan created volunteer groups of returnees, women becoming outreach workers and trainers.
- A multi-agency and multi-competent working team is indispensable to achieving success in R&R practices. It allows a flexible approach to beneficiaries' specific needs and challenges.
- Throughout rehabilitation programs, practitioners must focus on trust-building and trust-gaining practices. Investing time to establish a trustful relationship between practitioners and beneficiaries is crucial.
- Mobilizing and training multidisciplinary specialists, including psychologists, pedagogics, social workers, doctors, and theologians, must be a priority. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan trained specialists in advance to prepare them for the specific needs of returnees.