



Examining Gendered Components of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Albania

Woman Center for Development and Culture, Albania

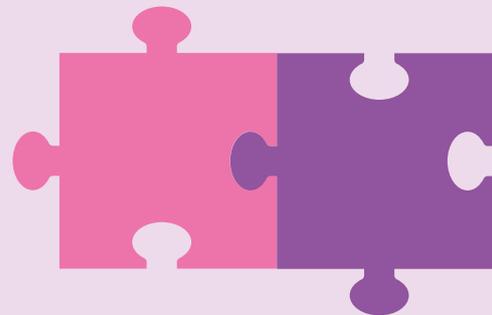
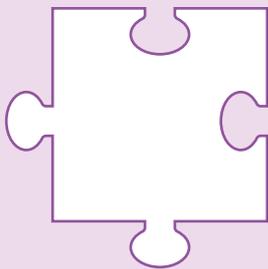




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December 2020





Disclaimer

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ACRONYMS

DRR - De-radicalization, Re-integration and Rehabilitation
VE - Violent Extremism
VEOS - Violent Extremism Organizations
INSTAT - Albanian Institute of Statistics
ALL - Albanian Lek
PVE - Preventing Violent extremism
CSOs - Civil Society Organisations
VERLT - Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism
AMC - Albanian Muslim Community
AOAC - Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last five years, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has become a priority issue in Albania addressed by a wide range of stakeholders. This report concludes that these actors acknowledge the importance of focusing on the role of women in P/CVE. However, there is still a lack of understanding and analysis of women's engagement in violent extremism (VE) and their roles in P/CVE. This report seeks to examine Albanian women's issues to address VE and provide recommendations to adequately address the underlying concerns raised by the research.

To fill a gap in the existing literature in Albania on radicalism and violent extremism, this report offers a comprehensive overview of three key issues:

1. The push factors driving Albanian women's travel to Syria during the ISIS conflict;
2. The de-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration of women in Albania; and,
3. The role of media in reporting VE issues along with new institutional approaches towards the nexus of women and P/CVE in Albania.

Overall, the analysis suggests that, as with men, there is not a single factor that independently affects Albanian women's participation in the conflicted areas in Syria and Iraq. Rather, a mixture of factors divided into macro and micro level are noted. Factors at the macro level under the category of socio-economic and political factors include high social marginalization levels, often fostered through poorly governed and rural areas, along with the experience of human and women's rights violations including discrimination on religious grounds. Women's experiences of domestic violence along with gender based discrimination in the workplace and overall gender inequality are also shown to have an impact. These combined with unmet social and economic needs, as well as high levels of corruption are aggravating factors making women more vulnerable to depart for foreign conflict zones, but cannot be considered the most crucial ones when it comes to women's engagement in VE.

Public opinion and the other state and non-state actors interviewed highlight three main factors that have influenced the Albanian women to go to Syria and Iraq. The most common perception of individuals' logic – as assessed through a nationwide representative opinion survey - was that they left to “join their husbands” (59.1% of all respondents), followed by factors related to a “lack of economic opportunities” (52.6%) and ideological factors (45.6%). These factors may be influenced by broader societal concerns, as well as VE-specific factors. Under the analysis of the factors at the macro level in this report the societal concerns that weight in heavily for survey's respondents include: youth unemployment, (63.9%), followed by high levels of corruption (53.7%) and the inequality between rich and poor (51.5%).

Beyond the “traditional” push and pull factors leading to VE and the general opinion that “VE is a male issue only,” it is very important to understand and address gender-specific factors. At the end of the analysis, this report finds that the dominant aspects influencing Albanian women's participation in war zones include:

- The patriarchal norms in society and families (mainly in rural areas of the country);
- A lack of economic independence of women and consequently, a dependence on their husbands;

- Personal reasons related to feelings of fear about the future after remaining alone after their husbands left, feelings and emotions of alienations and prejudices from the society after their husbands went to Syria and marriage structure where the women should stay close to their husbands. Under this category, it is also observed the presence of high levels of social pressure and prejudice for women related to practicing Islam and their outfit, which have influenced some of them to feel excluded from society; and,
- A lack of a strong religious women's community within Albanian Muslim societies leading to women often blindly believing their husbands' ideological interpretations. This is also related to the traditional patriarchal norms dominant in the country.

The analysis in this report reveals that the most significant motivating factors for Albanian women to travel to Syria/Iraq are those at the personal level correlated to the traditional patriarchal norms in the Albanian society and families mainly in rural areas of the country, which in the context of this report fall under the category of the cultural factors.

Under the personal (micro) level, the individual motives of the Albanian women are related to the perspective/structure of their marriage where the marriage is seen as the ultimate goal of a woman. This is closely associated with the patriarchal norms, particularly in rural areas of the country. Also, under this patriarchal context, the majority of Albanian women that have traveled to the Islamic State have "legitimized" the reasons why their husbands left to earn money and provide the family with a better income for a better life.

In the analysis of influencing factors, an important one is gender inequality (mainly related to the inequality of employability, education, paid work) and domestic violence, which, according to the existing literature, are frequently correlated to support for violent extremism. 47.3% of men and 70.4% of surveyed women in this report claim that the inequality between men and women in Albanian society is evident and that high levels of violence against women, particularly during the most recent years, are matters of concern that should be addressed more. This correlation between gender inequality, domestic violence and violent extremism should be further explored by additional research. In the context of this report, these two issues are closely related to patriarchal attitudes, thus contributing to gender inequalities in all spheres of social and economic life and the prevalence of violence against women. These issues can create socio-psychological side effects such as alienation and exclusion, anger and frustration; a strong sense of injustice; feelings of humiliation; and, a sense of victimhood, which combined with other factors mentioned above render women vulnerable to the allure of VE ideologies.

In addition to patriarchal norms, ideological factors are seen to also play a role – namely a lack of religious education for female believers. The findings of this report suggest that religious ideology and patriarchalism are strongly linked with each other due to the fact that women who left to foreign battlefields singularly believed the religious interpretations of their husbands. Hence, a higher level of the preparation of the clergy and their communication with the community of the women's practitioners is crucial. In this context, the role of women within religious communities, both Islamic and Orthodox-Catholic ones, should be increased.

The analysis of the personal factors that led Albanian women to depart for warzones suggests that the close family (parents, in-laws, sisters, and brothers) and family members' interaction plays a crucial role both during the prevention of VE and, equally, during De-radicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DRR) processes. From the information obtained from the interviews with the relatives and acquaintances of people who fled to Syria and Iraq, none of the parents, sisters, or brothers were aware of the fact that the sons of the family at first and their wives were planning to leave and join the Islamic State (ISIS). The control of radicalization as a process and the role of the nuclear family in preventing this phenomenon are issues that have



also recently begun to come to the attention of actors dealing with violent extremism. However, so far in Albania, there is no accessible evidence of families actively preventing their children from travelling to Syria/Iraq.

The report's findings suggest that addressing the complexity of the influencing factors that lead women to VE requires a joint intervention from a wide range of stakeholders both at national and local levels. In this regard, state and non-state actors' active contributions, particularly at the local level, is a fundamental need that will assist the country's efforts to better prevent and counter VE. A multi-sectorial approach should drive this contribution, including the design of specific programs and activities for women including: 1) women's employability programs, 2) awareness-raising activities on gender equality, 3) capacity-building activities and those aiming to increase the leadership role of women within the religious communities, 4) activities aiming to boost the community resilience in preventing VE, 5) improving psycho-sociological support for families and children in the school's settings and beyond.

Regarding the second key topic taken into our analysis: De-radicalization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration are seen as nascent and under-explored issues for the country. All the report's stakeholders highlight the fact that the Albanian government should take action for the return of the women and children currently in ISIS prisoner of war camps and their DRR. However, this report highlights several needs and challenges that should be in place. The design of the DRR strategy must be guided by a multi-actor approach, while provisions must be made for increasing the knowledge and capacities of central and local institutions on how to address DRR issues for women and children. On the other side, local communities themselves all over the country should be prepared on the approach towards women and children returnees. In this regard, the local communities in Albania at this moment have high levels of fear and prejudices towards returnees. The public perception survey in this report found that 21.6% of the overall respondents share the opinion that the returnees will not be welcomed to their local communities where they live, compared to 18% of those who believe that they will be welcomed. Furthermore, 20% of the surveyed population considers returnees as a risk for the community's safety. However, in both cases, it is observed that there are high percentages (more than 40%) of the surveyed population that do not know the answer to these questions. This, according to the civil society organisations and media representatives, is related to the lack of information of the communities on women and children returnees as well as on the lack of awareness-raising on DRR for the returnees.

This report finds that high level of prejudices and fear of the community are linked to a lack of understanding about women's and children's experiences in prison camps for former ISIS members, particularly in the Al-Hol camp (one of two camps in Syria where the relatives of fighters or families of the foreign fighters have been incarcerated after the fall of ISIS in 2019). In this camp there are currently approximately 50 women and children from Albania (Kasapi, 2020). The vast majority of the interviewees, including government institutions representatives, local civil society organizations, religious communities' representatives, and of the survey's respondents, consider women as "victims" of their husbands. They state that these women have played a "household" role within the Al-Hol camp, thus not being active neither in recruitment, nor in conducting terrorist acts. This "household" role has been explored by Albanian journalists who interviewed women at Al-Hol in 2019. From the information obtained from inside this camp, the journalist Julian Kasapi argues that the Albanian women have always wanted to be separated as much as possible from the rest of the women of other nationalities which were active fighters and recruiters, or even to be as far away as possible from the dangers of the camp itself. In doing so, they were constrained to move little by little towards the farthest end of the camp. Such a division has been as a "protection tool" for them to retain their less active household role (Kasapi, 2020). However, this information does not constitute an argument that these women do not pose a risk on their



return to society or that they are not radicalized. On the contrary, examining their past and their level of involvement/radicalisation in the ISIS camps could reduce fear among the communities, as mentioned above. In this regard, an important role in informing, raising awareness and boosting community resilience ought to be served by media and civil society organisations.

The findings in this research emphasize the importance of a “whole-society approach” at P/CVE focusing on women. Such an approach should consider women both as an exposed group to VE and as agents of change within the families and the local communities. Stakeholders involved in this report give a role to a wide range of state and non-state actors and suggest that (beyond the initiatives undertaken so far in the country), there is a need for long-term and sustainable coordination and cooperation among all actors. Additionally, attention should also be paid to monitoring the progress of these interventions as the main tool for the continuity of efforts in preventing VE as well as to better address DRR processes.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences and evidence gathered for this study report, the first of the kind in Albania in addressing gender issues to prevent and counter radicalization and violent extremism, highlight many recommendations to various state institutions and other non-state actors as stated below:

1. **Central-level state institutions** responsible for implementing the CVE National Strategy such as the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, should analyze and evaluate the role of women and girls in their current plans. In this context, the gender dimension should play an essential role in addressing women not only as a vulnerable group in society regarding the VE phenomenon but also as a factor of change. To make this happen, the relevant institutions need to analyze the specific leading factors for women and girls towards VE and design sound action plans in this regard.
2. Although **education** itself does not emerge as one of the factors that have influenced Albanian women to travel to war zones, rather than an important element at strengthening women's independence, education institutions and the responsible institution at the central level - the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, should continue to offer training sessions with the teaching staff and parents, as first-line employees. From a gender perspective, these training sessions should focus on issues such as domestic violence, women's rights, and gender equality.
3. On the other hand, **religious communities** should also make an effort to strengthen women's role within these communities. So far, women have had a supporting or secondary role in religious communities. At the same time, it is particularly important to train clergy and theological women on how to approach and reintegrate into relevant communities.
4. **Central institutions** should start taking into account the return of women and children who are still living in Syria. Also, they should adopt comprehensive policies for their reintegration and rehabilitation.
5. **Institutions at the central and local levels**, together with religious communities, should engage in drafting joint plans to address the de-radicalization process.
6. **Institutions at the central and local levels, together with other non-state actors**, should cooperate with the families of foreign fighters and support them. The psychological treatment of family members of returned women toward positive parenting can be seen as the main factor in the reintegration and adaptation of children in society.
7. **The Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism**, in cooperation with other responsible institutions and civil society actors, should promote community awareness on the role of women in PVE and significantly increase their knowledge/ information on DRR.
8. **Local government institutions, as well as law-enforcement institutions** at the local level, are recommended to focus on analyzing and designing specific programs for relevant local contexts, integrating concrete initiatives for women and girls in communities, in DRR, and preventing VE.
9. As one of the main actors in raising awareness and informing the community, **the media** should be more involved in promoting successful models in society, including returnees, in order to avoid the existing prejudices in local communities.



10. **Expansion of interventions should be done at the national level**, not only in certain areas such as “hot areas” or remote rural areas where women and girls’ isolation is more dominant, and patriarchal structures are stronger.
11. **Respective institutions and the business community** should promote employment initiatives for women’s economic empowerment, particularly focusing on the local level and the rural areas.

Given the vital role that civil society organizations engaged with gender issues play, they should build capacities on methods of how to merge the women’s issues in the framework of PVE, with a particular focus at the local level. It is also suggested that these organizations, as well as the other ones, should expand their activities all over the country (not focusing on the hot areas) and should be engaged more at monitoring the level of the implementation of these initiatives.



METHODOLOGY

Main aims and research questions

The team of contributors undertook this research with the general aim of proving insights and facts in understanding women's role and involvement in violent extremism in Albania and providing evidence-based recommendations on related policy gaps to be used as a reference for policymaking and further research alike. The study strives to meet two specific objectives as follows:

1. To explore and understand the drivers that lead women in Albania to be involved in VE; and
2. To identify evidence-based recommendations on building interventions that effectively engage women in P/CVE, as well as government intervention to address de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration with particular focus on women.

To meet these objectives, the main guiding research questions were:

1. What are the main drivers (push and pull factors) influencing Albanian women's roles in and involvement in VE?
2. What programs could be most effective for the de-radicalization and reintegration of women who have returned from conflict zones?

Theoretical framework and research design

We employed the theoretical framework of external drivers, which identifies three different categories of drivers of violent extremism: socio-economic, political, and cultural. A country's state of democracy and its level of socio-economic development raises concerns that, in combination with individual factors, they may threaten specific groups/individuals in society through the power of manipulation of extremist ideologies (Vurmo, Gj., Sulstarova, E., 2018). In this regard, it was imperative to focus also on the individual level (micro-level) to understand how the process of radicalization at the individual level might be triggered.

The connection of the micro-level to the macro-level analysis is suggested by the latest literature, which states that: "external factors influence the individual and inform grievances that make a person susceptible to recruitment" (Holmer, G., Bauman, P., 2018). To this end, an understanding of risk factors helps build awareness of who might be vulnerable to recruitment by Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) or to participation in VE activity and may help support early interventions by families, communities, teachers, and others close to those at risk (Holmer, G., Bauman, P., 2018).

Against this theoretical backdrop and to best address the research questions put forward, the research adopted a mixed-method design to leverage the particular strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The qualitative component consists of a literature review, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with one woman returnee and relatives of other female and male foreign fighters. It was beneficial in helping understand the pathways/drivers, how the involvement of Albanian women in VE occurs, and to understand the role of women behind their husband's decision to join the conflict. Furthermore, it was useful in delving into the role played by public authorities in the prevention and on how women could build the resilience of their local community. Before embarking on the quantitative component, the first step employed was



qualitative research, which consisted of a survey that targeted the general resident population of Albania of age 18+. The survey's objective focused on the main drivers at both micro and macro level influencing Albanian women's role and involvement in VE.

The quantitative component was employed to delve into the main drivers - both push and pull factors - at the society in large while analyzing more complex questions regarding the interaction of drivers with various social, political, and economic vectors. Next, the qualitative findings were integrated with quantitative results from the public perception survey to outline a conceptual framework of the mechanisms and pathways of radicalization.

This research design allows for a holistic picture of the role and involvement of women in Albania in VE phenomena based both on the specific experience of returnees and on the interactions at the societal level.

Research methods and data collection

As far as this research's qualitative component is concerned, the data collection methods used included interviews and focus group discussions. The collection of testimonies relied on a snowball sampling approach beginning with respondents identified within the network of Woman Center for Development and Culture, Albania, in cooperation with relevant authorities. So far, the testimonies or interviews with women foreign fighters have been missing from the Albanian pool of research on violent extremism due to the challenges of reaching out to this category of women. Therefore, this research fills this information gap by comprising the first testimonies of their kind from one woman returnee and some relatives of other women and men who are currently living in Syria.

Interviews

First, a total of 13 in-depth interviews with a mixed population, such as woman returnees, wives, and partners of male returnees and their families and relatives, were conducted to document the returnees' life history and to get the full-nuanced picture of these women and their narratives. The data collection instruments were built based on the practices used from the Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS) and tailored to the Albanian context (Jakupi, R., Kelmendi, V., 2017). Rapport-based interviewing techniques were employed by utilizing the application of a behavioral coding framework referred to as the "ORBIT" (Observing Rapport-Based Interpersonal Techniques) coding framework (Alison, L., Alison, E., Noone, G., Elntib, S., Christiansen, P., 2013).

Second, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with religious communities (Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, Bektashi) and women representatives of women forums/departments of these communities.

Third, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with government institutions' representatives at the national and local levels. They include representatives of state institutions working on several issues, such as security issues, education, social, economic issues, and local government institutions/departments. Based on the Albanian National Strategy on P/CVE, they are considered as key actors to address P/CVE issues. These interviews aimed to gather their views on the role of women in violent extremism and P/CVE and to delve into how women's role should be addressed.



Below are the details on conducted interviews:

Table 1 List of interviews

Population typology	Number of interviews	Type of interview	Date/Period of interviews
Women returnee	1	In-depth	December 2019
Families and relatives of women returnees/FTF	13	In-depth	December 2019- March 2020
Religious community members	15	Semi-structured	December 2019- March 2020
Policy- and decision-makers in P/CVE such as the head of law enforcement agencies; state institutions on education (teachers, responsible persons for school as a community center ¹), representatives of municipal security councils, head of local government institutions/departments responsible for social and economic aid	15	Semi-structured	December 2019- March 2020

Focus group discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions (FGDs) reached out to approximately 75 representatives from local communities of Shkodra, Bulqiza, Elbasan, Pogradec, and Tirana municipalities. They aimed at providing an added dimension on women’s role in P/CVE as well as on the main factors that might influence or threaten the Albanian women’s role and involvement in VE. The participants of focus group discussions represented local communities of different local government units (municipalities), local/regional educational directories/offices, local law enforcement agencies (commissariats), and local media entrepreneurs, teachers, and parents.

Table 2 List of FGDs

Population typology	Number of FGDs	Location	No. of male participants	No. of female participants	Total no. of participants	Date/Period of interviews
Local state and non-state actors	1	Pogradec	1	13	14	January 19, 2020
Local state and non-state actors	1	Elbasan,	5	9	14	January 10, 2020
Local state and non-state actors	1	Shkodra, Bulqiza	2	8	10	December 28, 2019
Local state and non-state actors	1	Tirana	3	9	12	February 21, 2020
Local state and non-state actors	1	Vlora	9	6	15	January 24, 2020
CSOs	1	Tirana	3	10	13	February 1, 2020

1 The “school as a community center” is an approach and a model that is being applied in Albania as an instrument that makes the school an integral part of society, enhances possibilities of local actors for joint decision-making and community development, respect for diversity, and the use of community resources in boosting community resilience (IDM, 2019).

Nationwide survey

Under this survey's framework, Albania's general resident population was targeted through a questionnaire consisting of five sections: socio-demographic data, belief and religion, perceptions on religion, perceptions focused on gender inequality and discrimination, and perceptions on violent extremism.

Preliminary testing (piloting) of the survey was conducted to improve the instrument. The survey was conducted on the general population of citizens, aged 18+, who are permanent residents or citizens of Albania. The sampling was based on the latest census data updated with administrative information on the population. According to the 2018 INSTAT data, the size of the Albanian resident population was 2,870,324. The sample size was comprised of 1,000 respondents. At a 95 percent confidence level, with a population size of 2,870,324, the confidence interval of the sample estimates was ± 3 . The geographical coverage of the survey distribution is presented as follows:

Table 3 Survey distribution

Region	Municipality	Total	Urban	Rural	Male	Female
Berat	Berat	25	16	9	13	12
	Kuçovë	15	7	8	7	8
	Ura Vajgurore	10	3	7	4	6
Dibër	Bulqizë	17	6	11	8	9
	Dibër	30	9	21	14	16
Durrës	Durrës	64	44	20	30	34
	Krujë	21	11	10	11	10
	Shijak	12	4	8	6	6
Elbasan	Cërrik	10	3	7	7	3
	Elbasan	57	31	26	27	30
	Librazhd	11	3	8	5	6
	Peqin	12	4	8	9	3
	Prrenjas	13	4	9	6	7
Fier	Divjakë	12	3	9	6	6
	Fier	51	21	30	24	27
	Lushnje	30	12	18	16	14
	Mallakastër	17	9	8	8	9
Gjirokastër	Gjirokastër	15	9	6	7	8
	Memaliaj	11	5	6	5	6
Korçë	Devoll	11	2	9	6	5
	Korçë	27	18	9	13	14
	Maliq	14	2	12	7	7
	Pogradec	23	9	14	10	13
Kukës	Kukës	17	7	10	9	8
	Tropojë	13	5	8	8	5
Lezhë	Kurbini	16	7	9	6	10
	Lezhë	23	7	16	7	16
	Mirditë	11	5	6	4	7
Shkodër	Malësi e Madhe	11	2	9	6	5
	Shkodër	52	29	23	27	25
	Vau i Dejës	11	3	8	6	5



Tiranë	Kamëz	38	25	13	17	21
	Kavajë	15	7	8	6	9
	Tiranë	212	176	36	105	107
	Vorë	12	7	5	8	4
Vlorë	Sarandë	11	7	4	6	5
	Selenicë	10	1	9	4	6
	Vlorë	40	27	13	18	22
Total		1000	550	450	486	514

The data collection method used was face-to-face interviews conducted by a field research team composed of experienced field researchers. All field-work enumerators received training and guidelines on achieving data collection professionally and ethically. The period of the field research was 4 December – 22 December 2019.

Data analysis

Regarding qualitative data, taped recording interviews and FGDs were transcribed, preserving the original language, following informed consent, and keeping the interviews' anonymity. Transcribed interviews were then coded and analyzed with the qualitative program MAXqda, designed for computer-assisted qualitative methods.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, with univariate analysis conducted to obtain a general understanding of the sample. At the same time, bivariate analysis concerning gender and other variables was conducted to look at two variables simultaneously.

Ethical considerations

The research team ensured that the study was designed, implemented, and reported in an ethical manner considering all five pillars of ethical research: informed and voluntary consent, the confidentiality of information shared, the anonymity of research participants, benevolence, or no harm to participants, and reciprocity.

Survey respondents' demographics

As mentioned above, the sample in this study has national representativeness. The gender ratio of respondents is crucial in both rural and urban areas (*chart no.1*). Specifically, the gender division of respondents in this research is as follows: 51.4 % females and 48.6 % males, where the highest percentage is that of the age group of 26-35 years old (26.6% males and 24.8 % females), followed by the age group of 18-25 years old (17.8% males and 23.4% females), while other age groups are at levels of 15% -18% (*chart no.2*).

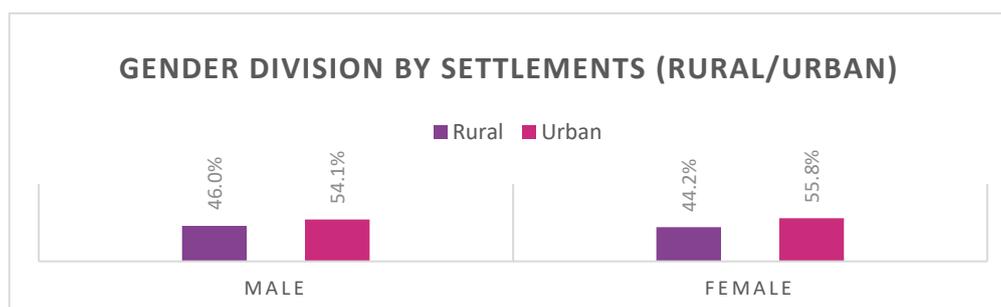


Chart no. 1

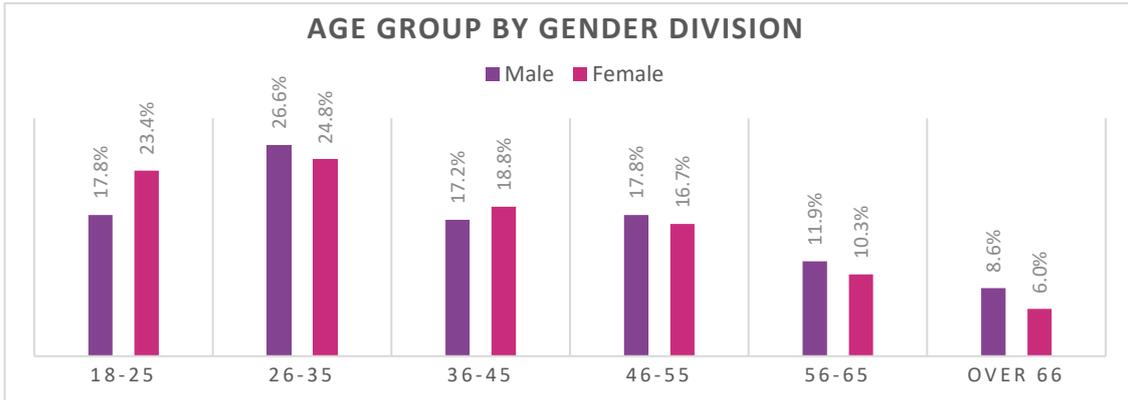


Chart no. 2

Concerning their educational level (*chart no.3*), the vast majority of respondents claim to have a “high school” diploma (46.5% males and 32.9% females) or to have completed the first level of studies at university- Bachelor’s degree (25.02% of which are females and 18.2% males).

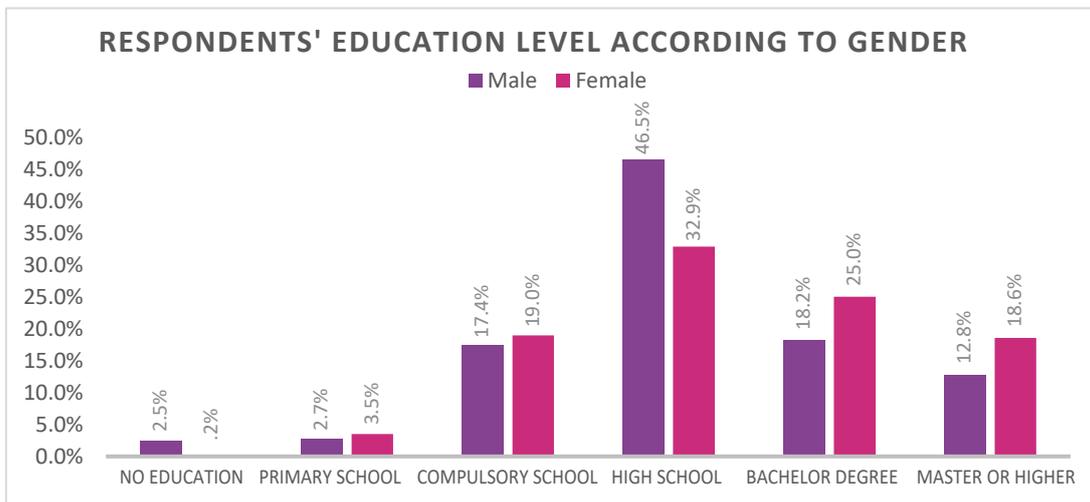


Chart no. 3

From the religious point of view (*chart no.4*), the vast majority of respondents claim to belong to Islamic religions (62.2% males, 55.4% females), followed by lower levels (over 10% of respondents) of the Orthodox and Catholic communities, while 10% of male respondents and 8.2% of female respondents claim not to be part of any religion. Meanwhile, in terms of practicing their faith, 23.2% of male respondents and 30.4% of female respondents are religious practitioners. When asked if they have the same religious affiliation as their family, over 90% of the surveyed respondents of both sexes claimed that they share the same religious faith.

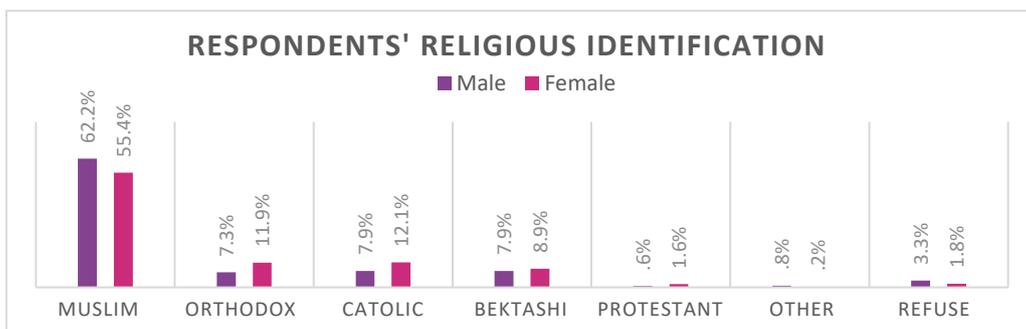
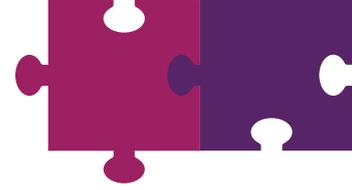


Chart no. 4



WOMEN SPECIFIC FACTORS IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM

According to literature, there is still a general opinion that Violent Extremism (VE) and terrorism are issues that concern men only. However, as the data show, about 550 Western women have traveled to ISIL / Da'esh- occupied territory and that 17% of foreign European fighters/ warriors are women (Orav, A., Shreeves, R., Radjenovic. A., 2018). Moreover, according to Europol, one in four people arrested in Europe for terrorist activities in 2016 was a woman (Orav, A., Shreeves, R., Radjenovic. A., 2018). Furthermore, recent studies highlight the fact that women's involvement in extremist organizations and their role in conflicted countries or violent situations often is more complicated than assumed (Eggert, 2018), and that women at the same time "can be victims, violent actors or agents of positive change"(Dufour-Genneson, S. Alam, M., 2014). Women may act as peace-builders, including through women's organizations, using their influence in the families and communities to establish unique solutions to support prevention, de-radicalization, psycho-sociological support, and rehabilitation from radicalization and violent extremism (Dufour-Genneson, S. Alam, M., 2014). On the other hand, women are not only the victims of VE. They can also serve as mobilizers and supporters for terrorist organizations, recruiters, fundraisers, and even as doers of terrorist acts (Bhulai, R., Peters, A., Nembr, C., 2016).

Throughout the review of the existing literature on "push and pull factors of Albanian women in violent extremism," it was noted that, as in men, there is no one specific factor for women and girls that affects the process of radicalization and/or their participation in terrorist groups or their traveling to the conflicted areas of Syria and Iraq (Jakupi, R., Kelmendi, V., 2017). As field researchers in Albania, we reach the same agreement as well. Based on existing literature and analysis of information obtained from several state and non-state actors, one in-depth interview with a woman returned from Syria and Iraq and their families and relatives, as well as perceptions of respondents in the national survey, the push and pull factors are divided into two levels: macro and micro. Guided by the interaction of these factors and the complexity for addressing them, women's influencing factors in violent extremism in the Albanian context are analyzed based on two main pillars:

1. Factors at the macro level comprise the political system, the good-governance, socio-economic and social elements, faith and religion, influence of social groups, violence against women, gender inequality, and marginalization. Addressing these factors requires appropriate policy direction from both central and local government institutions with particular focus also on the community's behavior and resilience.
2. Factors at the micro level include psycho-sociological and ideological factors that can be addressed through individual work and support to the families of women belonging in these categories.

Findings on macro-level factors

Based on the academic agreement so far, the category of macro factors includes three main separate groups, such as *socio-economic, political, and specific cultural factors*. Within each of these factors, a wide range of conditions interact: Interactions under the socio-economic factors include high levels of social marginalization, poorly governed areas, human and women's rights violations, unmet social and economic needs. In contrast, interactions under the political factors

include involving high levels of corruption, impunity for elites and specific cultural factors for Albania (Vurmo, Gj., Sulstarova, E., 2018) including the influence of local religious clerics, and level of religious education. These factors, combined with other factors at the personal level (micro-level), can create the right “ground” to develop individuals/groups of vulnerable people who can be easily manipulated by extremist ideology (Vurmo, Gj., Sulstarova, E., 2018). The analysis of these factors, as well as the identification of the most specific factors for women and girls, is essential in addressing and further drafting appropriate interventions for families, communities, or other groups/ or people who may be vulnerable to this phenomenon (Holmer, G., Bauman, P., 2018).

The surveyed population in this study was presented with several options, as to which are the most concerning issues for Albania (*chart no.5*). As noted, the three most problematic issues the respondents are most concerned about are *youth unemployment*, which holds the highest level at 63.9%² (64.2% of male respondents and 63.6% of female respondents), followed by *high levels of corruption* with 53.7% of the general surveyed population (54.9% of male respondents and 52.5% of female respondents) and the *inequality between rich and poor* comprising 51.5% of the general surveyed population (54.5% of male respondents and 48.6% of female respondents).

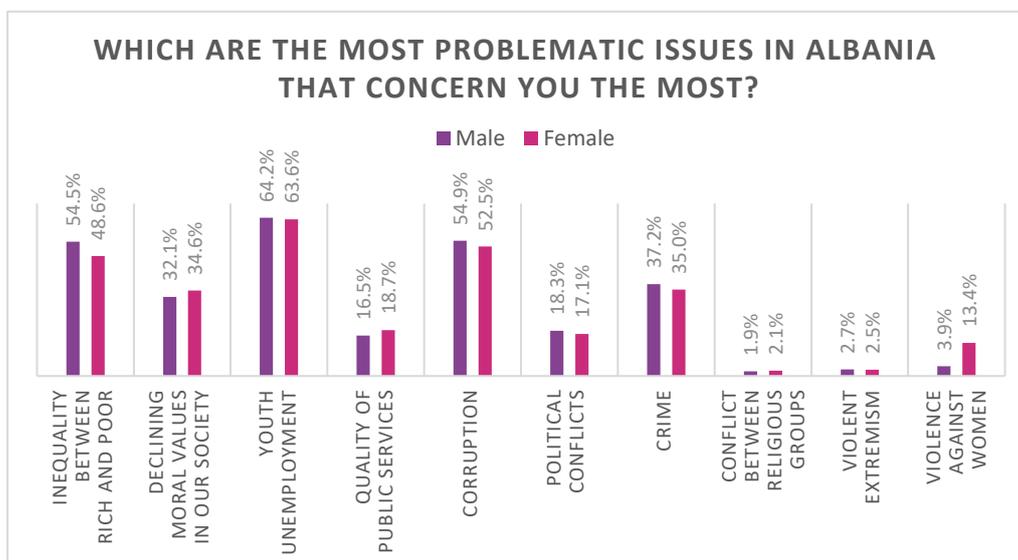
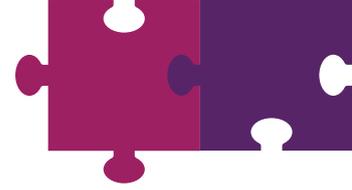


Chart no. 5

From a gender perspective, there is no difference in responses among all male and female survey respondents. Variation can be seen as regards the high level of corruption, which is mostly listed as a problematic issue among respondents in urban areas (58.7%), compared with 47.6% of the respondents in rural areas. The perception of the presence of crime in the country is high (36.1%), as is the “decline in the moral values of the society” (33.4%). The data from the survey is also a reflection of the socio-economic situation of the Albanian population, especially of the Albanian youth. According to the latest data of the INSTAT, the unemployment rate in the 15-29 age group is 21.4% (21.2% males and 21.5% females) (De Bruijn, B., Filipi, Gj., Nesturi, M., Galanxhi, E., 2015). Although these figures rank Albania in the first place among the countries of the Western Balkans for a low unemployment rate among youth, still the unemployment figures remain twice as high as those of the states of the European Union (World Bank Group, 2019). According to another study, unemployment and lack of security have also pushed many young people into leaving Albania during 2018-2019, where 40% of youth claimed that they wanted to leave the country (Kamberi, G., Çela, A., 2019). The financial situation and economic polarization play an essential role in the overall “well-being” of

2 This is the average value



the population and in the context of violent extremism. As such, individuals radicalized into violent extremism over the last few years in the Western Balkans (including those who have become foreign fighters) have come mostly from the economic margins (Vlado Azinović, Kimberly Storr, 2017). Even though the financial situation cannot stand as a single factor influencing VE, when combined with other factors such as widespread corruption and lack of security and justice may be a factor exploited by VE groups, which may offer wages or services. It is not poverty however that elicits support for VE but rather the acute form of social exclusion by government and society (Vurmo, Gj., Sulstarova, E., 2018). The surveyed population states that it is difficult for them to make a living on their income. In percentage terms, the male and female respondents share more or less the same approach in terms of difficulty they have in making a living, where the highest percentage is present at the levels “coping on present income” and “difficult” as presented in *chart no 6*.

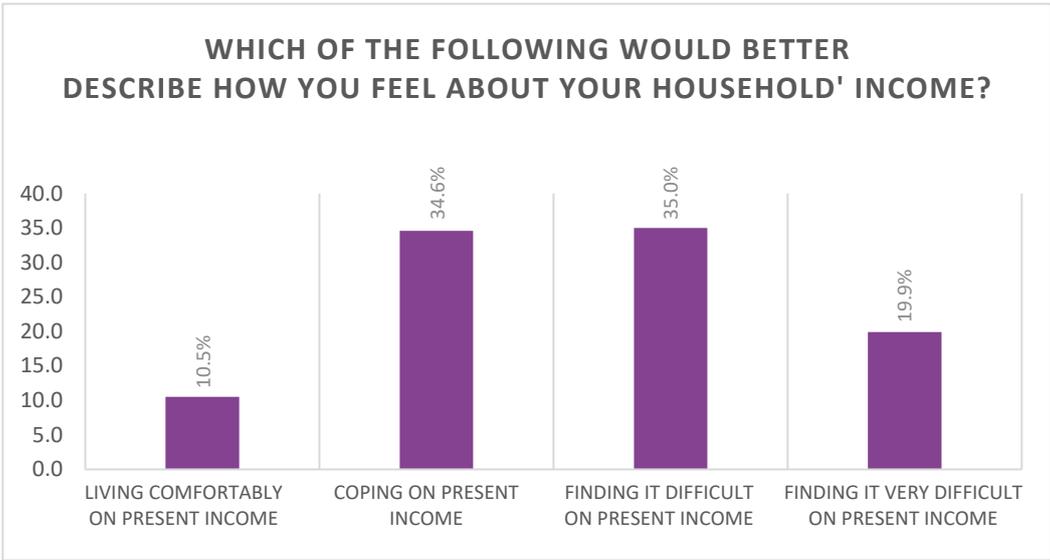


Chart no. 6

In fact, the difficulties in affording life are closely related to the employment rate and monthly income. Among the survey respondents, there is a high difference between women that do not have any income (31.6% of respondents) and male respondents (16.6%). There is little difference in revenue for the category of women and men who earn 23,000 Albanian Lek (ALL) (21.4% - women and 20.6% - men). Reversely, this difference increases for women and men who earn over 50,000 ALL per month; thus, there is a gender pay gap with a higher percentage of men who make over 50.000 ALL compared to women.

The survey, the focus group discussion, and interviews noted the difficult economic situation (intertwined with other factors further discussed in this study) as one of the reasons why Albanian women (mainly from rural areas) have traveled to warring areas or the Islamic State. One example is the case of 16-year-old Besa³, who was married at the age of 14 and faced with a challenging economic and social situation⁴.” After her husband left, her financial condition worsened. She lived in a mosque for a certain period because she alone could not afford to pay the rent of the house until she joined her husband abroad⁵. However, the poor economic conditions of people who traveled to Syria or Iraq are not the only factor. There are also other

3 Not her real name.
4 Participants in this focus group discussion included representatives from the municipality of Pogradec, teachers, high school students, representatives of health care institutions, journalists, religious community representatives (Pogradec, January 19, 2020).
5 Interview with the grandmother of the man foreign fighter W, (January 16, 2020).



cases where most FTF families have had average living standards⁶, owning small businesses, and were not to be considered poor since they could cover the traveling expenses by themselves⁷. These cases were reported from interviews with the returned woman and relatives of other returnees. One of the testimonies shows that the people who are currently in the war camps (including women) were, on their arrival to Syria/Iraq, initially treated well. Their minimum living conditions were met, and the daily budget spent on a family reached hundreds of dollars a day⁸.

It is precisely this misinformation that “seduces” unemployed people, those with economic difficulties and from deep rural areas. However, other testimonies were taken by other families who still communicate with their family members who are in the Al-Hol camps. They claim that their situation is miserable, as the interviewee says: “recently they desperately want to return, the situation is terrible and they are starving...” claiming that they are continually asking for financial help⁹.

On the other hand, difficult economic situations are related to the low employment rates of the population; however, it is difficult to say that unemployment is the only factor influencing Albanians to travel to Syria and Iraq. In the context of radicalization and violent extremism, unemployment constitutes an essential resource to individuals or extremist groups in radicalizing individuals (men and women) by promising a solution to their poverty and offering more lucrative economic opportunities through illegal ways. Civil society representatives in the focus group discussions state that people, particularly those from rural areas, have been more “attractive” for the recruiters given their difficult economic situations. The high level of corruption is more evident in rural areas, combined with a lack of proper religious education too¹⁰. Endemic corruption is part of the multi-faced set of drivers of violent extremism. Evidence from Transparency International suggests that the lowest-scoring countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) are often those experiencing conflict or war (UNDP, 2018). On the same note, the UN Secretary General’s Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism suggests that countries that fail to control corruption (amongst other indicators like poverty, unemployment, diversity management in accordance with human rights obligations) tend to witness a more significant number of incidents linked to violent extremism (UNDP, 2018). Survey respondents list corruption as one of the three problematic issues that most concern them (see above graph. no.5). The same concern among the Albanian population is visible in the opinion poll, “Trust in Governance 2019.” Most Albanian citizens perceive petty corruption (87.5%) and grand corruption (85.2%) as a widespread or very widespread phenomenon in Albanian society. Furthermore, the same opinion poll in 2019 reveals that 15% of the Albanian population has personally witnessed government corruption at the central level and 25.2% at the local level (Vrugtman L, Bino, B, 2020).

Chart no. 7 provides an overview of the perceptions of respondents on the main reasons why people (both women and men) have left Albania to join warring countries such as Syria and Iraq. What is noticeable is the high percentage of respondents who think that one of the main reasons is “financial benefits” (62.5% female respondents and 59.7% male respondents). This percentage is followed by a “lack of economic opportunities” (58.0% of female respondents and 63.8% of male respondents) and then “for ideological and religious faith” (53.3% of female respondents and 54.7% of male respondents).

6 Interview with the friend of a woman Mira, (January 5, 2020).

7 Interview with the sister and daughter of the family of fighter Y, (November 8, 2019).

8 Interview with the sister and the daughter of the dead fighter Z, (November 8, 2019).

9 Interview with the sister-in-law of the foreign fighter Z, (November 1, 2019).

10 Participants in this focus group include local actors in Vlora municipality such as: high school representatives, teachers, students, CSOs, representatives from shelters, youth groups, members of the Security Council. (Vlora, January 24, 2020).

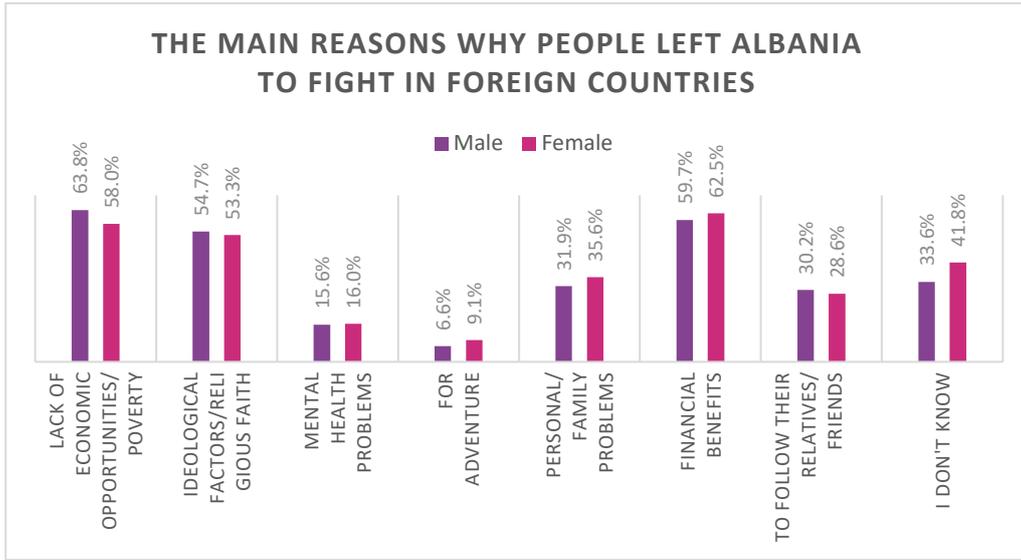


Chart no. 7

In the meantime, based on the perceptions from the general survey’s population, the factors that lead women in Albania to travel to warring countries of Syria and Iraq are reported as follows (*Chart no.8*). The highest percentage stands for “to join the husband” from both male and female respondents (59.1% female respondents and 59.7% male respondents). Also, other reasons are highly considered by the respondents, such as “lack of economic opportunities” (51.6% female respondents and 53.7% male respondents) and “financial benefits” (44.6% female respondents and 44.7% male respondents).

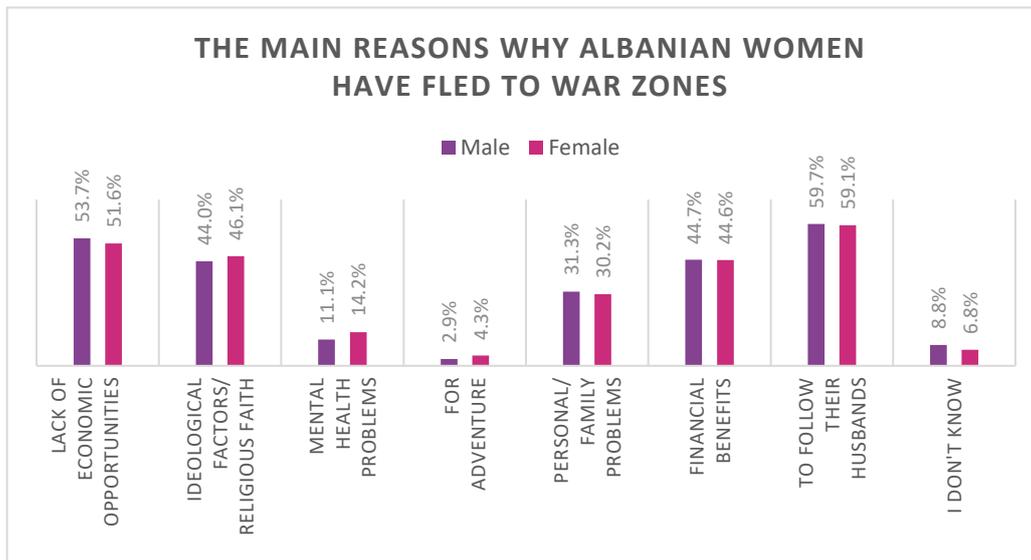


Chart no. 8

The dominance of these factors, particularly of the fact that the Albanian women have flown to war zones to join their husbands, is also underlined by civil society representatives engaged in preventing violent extremism in Albania, who from their experience (albeit based on little information they possess given their limited engagement at concretely working with returnees, women and their families) show that most Albanian women have not played an active role in the Islamic state¹¹. Still, they have traveled there to have a better life and to escape from extreme poverty. Many of them think that in these warring countries, they will find the house they did

11 Focus group “PVE Forum” discussion meeting, Tirana, (February 20, 2020),



not have and the rights they believe they have been denied regarding lack of job opportunities and lack of equal earnings (Ramkaj, 2019). Also, they believe they will be able to provide a good living to their children, as is the case of the woman named Moza¹², who followed her husband due to the lack of income in raising their three children¹³.”

The information from experts on VE in Albania shows that “Albanian girls and women, once in Syria, have been isolated at home, under constant pressure from other women with foreign citizenship. There were many non-Albanian women engaged in the fighting areas. Their contacts with the family were rare due to field engagement. The children did not receive normal education but only manipulative instructions in selected centers from the organizations they had joined” (Gjinishi, 2020).

Although women constitute the main priorities of some policies in Albania (INSTAT, 2020), the context given above shows once again that women’s economic empowerment, labor market engagement, labor force participation, and unpaid work in the family, particularly in rural/remote areas, as well as the position of youth and especially girls in the labor market, continues to remain a challenge in the Albanian society. This is also highlighted in the “Gender Equality Index Report for Albania” (2020). The interaction and amelioration of these factors, under the perspective of violent extremism, are essential for building women’s resilience and increasing their role in peace-building and prevention of VE (Coutur, 2014).

Gender inequality and patriarchy as a cultural factor

The principle of gender equality and non-discrimination are fundamental principles of the International Law on Human Rights. Promoting gender equality is a priority of all Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) member states, which have taken the commitment to promote gender equality as an integral part of their policy” (OSCE, 2000). Although the literature so far suggests that women are led into VE by the same group of socio-economic and political factors, other existing literature sheds light on specific factors that influence women’s engagement in VE, such as gender inequality, gender-based discrimination, and lack of economic and educational opportunities (Orav, A., Shreeves, R., Radjenovic. A., 2018).

Apart from the traditional factors leading to the VE, the analysis and the strong link between gender inequality and violent extremism have been addressed by Valerie Hudson and her co-authors in “Sex and World Peace.” They state that the best predictor of peace in a nation is not its level of democracy or wealth but rather the level of physical security enjoyed by its women (Hudson, Valerie M., 2012). Historically, women have been included in the category of marginalized groups in terms of access to the labor market, low opportunities for education, and low levels of participation in decision-making. The experience of living in a society that denies women’s full civil rights and economic opportunities can make some women perceive involvement in terrorism as a way to gain freedom, emancipation, respect, and equality (Orav, A., Shreeves, R., Radjenovic. A., 2018). Violation of these rights can deepen feelings of alienation, isolation, and exclusion that may make individuals more sensitive to radicalism (Orav, A., Shreeves, R., Radjenovic. A., 2018). In the Albanian context, the General Gender-Equality Index for 2017 marked 60.4 points, demonstrating a significant gender gap of 7 points below the EU-28 average (67.4), except for the area of governance, where Albania has a higher level of gender equality than other European Union countries. The most significant shortcomings in the gender gap in Albania are encountered in the fields of knowledge, money, and time spent doing unpaid labor (INSTAT, 2020).

12 Not her real name.

13 Testimony of Y woman mother-in-law who died in Syria, (January 12, 2019).



Gender inequality is noted to be in high levels even among respondents of this study, where 47.3% of men and 70.4% of women claim that there is noticeable inequality between men and women in Albanian society (*chart no 9*).

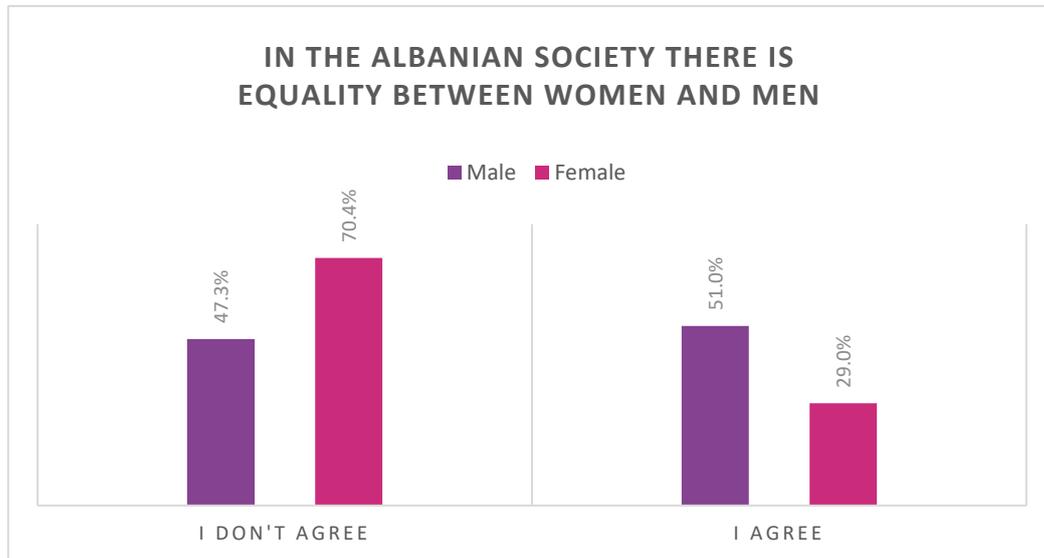
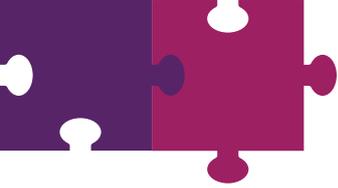


Chart no. 9

Higher levels of gender inequality, especially in terms of education, are more visible in rural areas of the country. In these areas, the number of men with secondary or higher education is higher than the number of women with secondary or higher education which is due to fewer possibilities for proper education, low rates of attendance of high school, and lower enrollment rates in vocational schools. Quality assessments (Housing and Population Census, and PISA study) raise concerns about the deterioration of the education system in rural areas. Some of the causes of this difficult situation are insufficient investments in infrastructure and human resources, high distance from residential areas, and vocational training institutions. Also, very few women participate in training programs, due to insufficient time and how training programs are organized (Zhlilima, E., Merkaj, E., Tahsini, I., Imami, D., Çela, E., 2016).

From a geographical point of view, there is no specific cause or group of reasons that affect women differently in different parts of the Balkans and European countries. However, some of the instigators and tendencies of radicalism and women's participation in terrorist / radical organizations are exposed differently in the Balkans, compared to other European countries such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (Kelmendi, 2018). This is due to the more significant challenges faced by women in the Balkans in terms of domestic violence, high levels of discrimination in socio-economic issues, and the dominance of patriarchal societies (Kelmendi, 2018). In the Albanian context, it is still challenging to address domestic violence, protecting victims of domestic violence, guaranteeing gender equality and gender equity, and providing minimum health and social services, especially at the local level (EC Albanian 2019 report, 2019). For example, only in the first two months of 2020 in Albania, five women were assassinated by their husbands. (Tushi, 2020). According to data provided by INSTAT and the survey on violence against women and girls in 2018 (INSTAT, 2019), it turns out that 1 in 2 women (52.9%) between the ages of 18-74 have experienced one or more than five kinds of violence (intimate partner violence, violent encounters, non-partner violence, sexual harassment and/or intimidation) during their lifetime (INSTAT, 2019). Moreover, according to the same study, traditional patriarchal attitudes remain prevalent throughout Albania and thus contributing to gender inequalities in



all spheres of social and economic life, as well as the prevalence of violence against women¹⁴.” We also notice the “legitimacy” of violence against women among the respondents in the study, as shown from chart no.10, where 7.6% of men and 3.5% of women agree with the fact that violence against women is justifiable in certain circumstances.

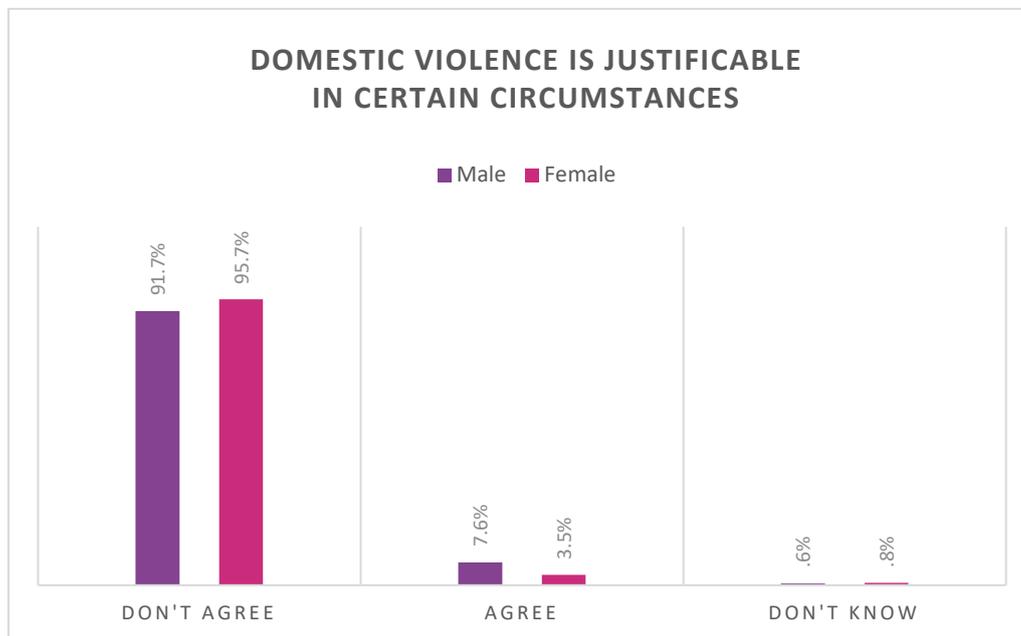


Chart no. 10

Patriarchal norms, the dominance of the male figure in the Albanian family, and “power” over women are noted by participants in the target group discussions to be among the most significant factors as to why Albanian women have traveled to war areas in Syria and Iraq. From the data of this study, there is only one case identified of a woman being raped by her husband and forced to accompany him to Syria¹⁵. In contrast, most of the interview taken from relatives of women and men still in war zones do not support the hypothesis that these women have been forced to follow their husbands. Instead, they have voluntarily (for a better life)¹⁶ joined their husbands to be near them (even when asked to do otherwise), and this shows once again the deep roots of patriarchal norms within the Albanian family, mainly in rural areas¹⁷ based on the “family code”(Kuko, 2020).

However, even in one case where the mother refused to join her son who had already left for war, the decision of the head of the family (father) was dominant, forcing his wife and his two other daughters and son to go to war. This example clearly shows that the men’s role as the head of the family enforces the patriarchal factor of society¹⁸.

The “patriarchal” factor is also supported by the interviewees and participants in the discussion meetings from different areas of Albania. According to them, “Albanian women have traveled to warring zones because they did not want to oppose their husbands. Whether ideologically

14 Participants in this focus group included local actors in Tirana municipality such as: teachers, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, members of the National Forum of CSOs in PVE in Albania. (Tirana, February 20, 2020).

15 Participants in this focus group included local actors in Tirana municipality such as: teachers, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, members of the National Forum of CSOs in PVE in Albania. (Tirana, February 20, 2020) Ibid.

16 Interview with the friend of the returned woman X. (January 5, 2020).

17 Ibid.

18 Interview with the sister of the Y fighter who is currently in Syria and at the same time the daughter of the family (who is there to stay close to the Y fighter), (November 8, 2019).



convinced or not, the women obeyed their husbands. Still, they did not travel there to fight”¹⁹. Such statements confirm the patriarchal context that prevails in the family structure in Albania. This context is also present and rich in evidence from women returned in other Balkan countries where patriarchal norms (especially those within the Muslim community) have played a significant role in their participation in conflicted areas in Syria and Iraq (Kelmendi, 2018).

In this patriarchal context, the majority of Albanian women that have traveled to the Islamic State have also “legitimized” the reasons why their husbands left “to earn money and provide the family with a better income for a better life.” The statement “A husband’s primary task is to be the breadwinner” is also supported at high levels by 48.2% of men and 45.7% of women surveyed²⁰.

Given the social and economic differentiation between men and women and the “duties” that women exercise in a patriarchal context, most women remained without any financial or family support after their husbands fled to the war zones. Some of these women were supported by their parents; while others were to remain with their husband’s families, with their in-laws, and some women were left without any support at all. In this situation, the only solution for them was to join their husbands wherever they were²¹. This situation is criticized by various civil society actors in the country who emphasize the need to focus on the role of women and girls, especially in rural areas. The CSO representatives suggest that more efforts should be made to educate the younger generation on gender equality to break gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, they deem important boosting economic empowerment and vocational education for women and girls. “Such interventions will help prevent cases such that of the girl from a low-income family, who was married at the age of 14 and at the age of 16 she left for Syria with her child to join her husband, who died there. The misfortune of this girl seems never to end as she was forced to remarry and give birth to another child”²².

Another case of a woman who testified that she did not want to stay there shows that she simply joined her husband after he had assured her that they could have a better life in Syria because the situation would soon get normal²³.

Factor analysis at the micro-level

The individual factors and nuclear family

The analysis of the micro-level factors influencing the decision of Albanian women to join the Islamic State is based mainly on the testimonies of relatives of women who have gone to Syria and Iraq. Also, it is based on the testimony of the returned woman and other evidence gained from civil society representatives and of state institutions in Albania.

Analysis at the micro-level is vital to understand factors that involve, as described by Dr. Alex P. Schmid: identity problems, failed integration, feelings of alienation, marginalization, discrimination, relative deprivation, humiliation (direct or by proxy), stigmatization, and rejection, often combined with moral outrage and feelings of (vicarious) revenge (Schmid, 2013).

In this category of micro factors, we find out that Albanian women are driven by individual

19 Participants in this focus group include local actors in Vlora municipality such as: high school representatives, teachers, students, CSOs, representatives from shelters, youth groups, members of the Security Council. (Vlora, January 24, 2020).

20 Nationwide survey for this study, WCDCA, 2020.

21 Testimonies from relatives of women who are currently in camps in Syria and Iraq.

22 Participants in this focus group discussion include representants from the municipality of Pogradec, teachers, high school students, representatives of health care institutions, journalists, religious community representatives, (Pogradec, January 19, 2020)

23 Interview with woman returnee Mira, (October 28, 2020).



motives, mainly related to the perspective/structure of their marriage, which is again closely associated with patriarchal norms. Almost all the evidence in this study see the woman as “victim” of their husbands and the aggravated financial situation. They are unable to raise and educate their children on their own. Some of them were even lied to by their husbands over the real situation in Syria, as the woman returnee Mira (not her real name) testifies: “My husband left 3-4 months before us. He asked me to go there, telling me that the situation was normal. I didn’t tell anyone I was leaving; even the kids didn’t know. They thought they were flying to England.”²⁴

The same testimony comes from relatives of another case who emphasize that “the woman didn’t even have a say in her husband’s decision to leave for Syria, but simply went after him. She respected his decision because that is how it should be.”²⁵

In this analysis of the personal motives that led Albanian women in flying to war countries, a crucial role is played by the close family (parents, in-laws, sisters, and brothers) and the interaction of family members. From the information obtained from the interviews with the relatives and acquaintances of people who fled to Syria and Iraq, almost none of the parents, sisters, or brothers were aware of the fact that the sons of the family at first and their wives were planning to leave to join the Islamic State. This is the case of a woman named Mira, whose family supposed that she went with her children to England to join her husband. It was her brother that, by occasion, noticed that her sister was not in England, one day when she wrongly had left the computer’s location on. Testimonials show that the moment when the parents have understood where their children are has been shocking. The case of woman returnee Mira can be considered as a positive one, given the fact that her family achieved to bring her and her two children back. But this is not the case for other parents looking for help from the state institutions to turn back home their children²⁶.

Despite being unaware of this phenomenon, the traditional and patriarchal form of the family organization is still visible. In such families, the men of the family are supposed to be the ones who should take care not only of their wives and children but also, in some cases, even increasing the responsibility and pressure of young men to take care of their parents as well. And with this mindset, men who have left for war countries have easily been able to lie to their families by making them believe that they are immigrating to Western European countries, such as England, Greece, Germany, or to study in the Middle East. The control of radicalization as a process and the role of the nuclear family in preventing this phenomenon are issues that have also recently begun to come to the attention of actors dealing with violent extremism. However, so far in Albania, there is no evidence of cases of families that prevent the traveling of their children to Syria/Iraq.

From our observations for this study, people (men and women) come from families with traditional backgrounds of the Albanian family, respecting and considering the role of the husband as a pillar of the family. In contrast, the respondents in the study emphasize that the structure of the Albanian family has changed since the ‘90s. It faces more issues that affect its “sustainability” due to the socio-economic problems, especially in rural areas, the perceived reduction of moral values in society by young people, and the complete lack of care for their old parents (Ramkaj, 2019). The decrease in moral values in the community is also listed as one of the issues that concern the most 32.1% of male respondents and 24.6% of female respondents in the survey of the presented study (see graph no.5 above).

24 Interview with woman returnee Mira. This is not her real name, (October 28, 2020).

25 Testimony of members of family of the returned woman Mira, (December 1, 2019).

26 Interview with sister in-law of a woman who travelled to Syria with her husband and two children. The woman and her husband are believed to have been killed in Syria, while the children are supposed to be still in ISIS camps.



RELIGIOUS FAITH AND IDEOLOGY

Extremist religious ideology as an essential instigator for Albanian women to travel to Syria and Iraq

In the analysis of the factors that have influenced Albanian women to travel to Syria and Iraq, the ideological factor is quite dominant as well, in addition to the patriarchal one. Religious illiteracy and misperceptions about Islam among Muslims have been sponsored in Albania (through investments, salaries, etc.) by foreign influences, which are considered as an “invisible hand” that might incite extremism (Vurmo, 2018).

There is no rigorous or complete definition of ideology. However, it is widely used to describe the underlying set of values, myths, ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and doctrines that shape the behavioral approach to political, economic, social, cultural and/or ecological activities of an individual or organization (Burrowes, 2016). Nevertheless, religion and ideology are two terms that are often confused due to the closeness in their meanings and concepts. Karl Mannheim claims that theories, norms, beliefs, etc., “deteriorate” into ideology when they prevent humans from dealing with themselves at a particular historical stage (Baehr, 2013). On the other hand, Geertz emphasizes the political and cultural context of the ideology of religion when referring to Islam (Slyomovics, 2012). The main features of this context are the discourse of religious traditions, the breakdown of traditional consensus, doubt increasing, and loss of orientation, which are influenced by the spread of modern secularism, which put secularism first (Norman, 2007). Besides, there are also the consequences left by the Albanian communist dictatorship, which declared itself the “first atheist country in the world” in 1976, where religion and religious practices were banned by the constitution (Bezati, 2019). Undoubtedly, the period of total closure during the communist system affected religion and traditional communities by creating a huge vacuum both in terms of literature (the destruction of hundreds of libraries), the lack of religious teachers and theologians (the closure of religious schools), financial impossibility, lack of income, and even the properties of Waqf (According to the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, Waqf is an endowment made by a Muslim to a religious, educational, or charitable cause - Oxford, 2003) that were still nationalized, occupied or even alienated. In ‘88 -’89, the first signs of the revitalization of religion in Albania were manifested by allowing some clerics of Albanian descent to visit Albania, for example, Mother Teresa (Clayer, 2007). Here begins one of the main differences from the organizational point of view between religious communities, which can be an important determinant of how different challenges were then managed.

In contrast to the Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (KOASH) and the Catholic Church, which have a smaller group of followers, the AMC faced difficulties such as the lack of clerics, theologians, and funds in these years of the Islamic revival in the country. There was a flow of aid, funds, and charitable organizations from many countries: Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar. Very soon, such terms as ‘Wahhabi,’ ‘Salafi,’ ‘bearded,’ ‘radical,’ ‘fundamentalist,’ ‘terrorist’ begin to circulate as if they are the same thing when, in reality, there are nuanced differences that were not taken into account by most mainstream audiences (Zaimi, 2017).

Religious radicalism was not a “sui generis” phenomenon that suddenly appeared in Albania in 2013, but it has been circulating in Albania for years and was intertwined with the return of some students with extremist beliefs who created the second spirit of religious radicalization. Upon return, some clerics failed to comply with the moderate tradition of Islam that is preached in Albania. Instead, they preached Salafism or Wahhabism, refused to be administrated by AMC, and received funds from questionable sources in the Gulf (Vrugtman, 2018). Furthermore, the vacuum and eagerness to approach religion among the population created enough space for other religious sects (often radicals)



to enter the communities using various means, such as sports activities for young people, foreign languages courses, and summer camps for children or even economic aid to the low-income families (Kursani, 2015). Religious radicalism in Albania was further fueled by the Iraq War in 2003, which created a sense of hostility to the West among some young believers and paved the way for some imams and self-proclaimed extremists who share the idea that Islam is under global attack and that it should be protected (Hide, 2017). The presence of radical currents, or of specific people or groups that incite extremist currents, continues to be perceived as a “threat” to local communities in Albania. As can be seen from *graph no. 11*, 17.4% of respondents agree that “the number of individuals and / or radical groups in Albania is increasing” and claim more the presence of individuals with extreme tendencies rather than such groups. Extreme tendencies in this context are not necessarily related to the religion, but with the individual practice of the religion of some believers, although so far in Albania, the phenomenon of violent extremism has been linked to religious grounds. Different forms of violent extremism in Albania like anti-establishment, populist or other political radical narratives (Vurmo, Gj., Sulstarova, E., 2018) are still issues that require more research. However, in preventing and opposing violent extremism, the role of religion and clergy should not be excluded, an approach which is also supported by the United Nations (UNIATF, 2018) under the 2030 Agenda, which underlines the role of religion and religious leaders in preventing this phenomenon.

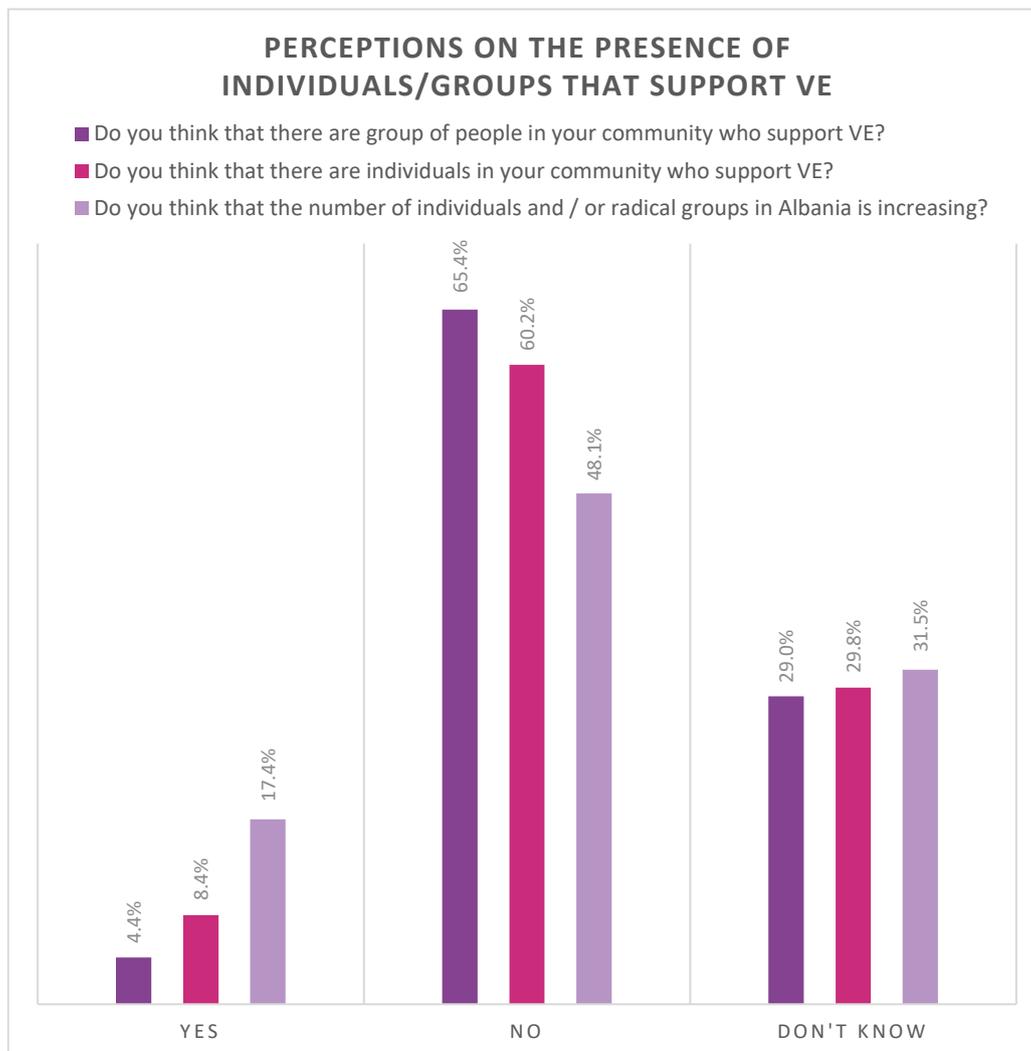


Chart no. 11



The experience so far in Albania and the evidence obtained from women and men in the war countries of Syria and Iraq reconfirm that the “religious factor” has been dominant. This is most likely due to religious manipulation and distorted religious discourse, a lack of accurate religious references, and the influence of social networks and seduction through propaganda. Additionally, a lack of background knowledge from the religious institution based on doctrine, influence, and uncertainty over what was happening in Syria (Gjinishi, 2020). This is the case showed in the discussion meeting in Tirana with civil society representatives regarding a man (approx. 30 years old) who had a perfect position at his workplace. In three months, his behavior changed, and he had fled to Syria. The same case is also present in a family from Shkodra who lived in Austria and fled to Syria due to religious manipulation²⁷.

On the other hand, the representatives of religious communities participating in this study and the experts on VE highlight that inter-religious ignorance leads to increased prejudices both within the same religious community and between different religious communities. This happens especially within the communities in rural areas, which are small communities that tend to preserve the traditional rituals and ties that they have with each other²⁸. This prejudice has caused almost all women who have fled to Syria and Iraq not to tell the truth to their relatives, but to lie by saying that they are immigrating to England with their husbands²⁹. Prejudice, discrimination, pressure from the local communities, and exclusion due to the practice of religion, and rituals related to the dress code (hijab), have been influential factors in creating social pressure for the vast majority of women/families who have joined ISIS, as reported in the analysis made of interviewees’ statements. This is the case of the woman whose husband has traveled to Syria, deciding to leave the small village (with a minority of Muslim population) together with her family due to discrimination. Instances of discrimination include humiliation from the community, lack of job opportunities, and no social integration support from the community for her hijab, even inside her husband’s family. Several FGDs participants said that in some regions of the country, especially in remote rural areas, different religions are trying to approach young people in a modern or seductive way, both in money and in the provision of foreign language courses, or primarily by being around the clergyman. In the conversation with the focus group in the city of Pogradec, where teachers and psychologists were also present, it was emphasized that: “Religion is doing what schools, society, institutions are failing in doing.” In this regard, stakeholders from Pogradec says that the religious organizations are targeting young people who lack proper religious education and live in rural areas due to poor knowledge and socio-economic conditions or users of social networks where these ideas are transmitted³⁰.

The role of the communication of the clergy is also very important in the case of religious information for girls and women. But in this context, the role of women within religious communities, both Islamic and Orthodox-Catholic religion, should be increased. The Catholic Church is masculine in many ways. It is good to be open, so women can take important roles and responsibilities in organizing various activities in addressing the phenomenon of violent extremism and religious information and inter-religious cooperation. In this way, women themselves will be able to gain more self-confidence and will be more active (Valente, 2019). The Muslim community representatives in Albania have the same opinion regarding the role of women within

27 Participants in this focus group included local actors in Tirana municipality such as: journalists, university students, university professors, researchers and VE experts. (February 1, 2020).

28 Participants in this focus group include local actors in Vlora municipality such as: high school representatives, teachers, students, CSOs, representatives from shelters, youth groups, members of the Security Council, Vlora, (January 24, 2020).

29 Interview with the woman returnee Mira (October 28, 2019).

30 Participants in this focus group discussion include representatives from the municipality of Pogradec, teachers, high school students, representatives of health care institutions, journalists, religious community representatives, Pogradec, (January 19, 2020).



the community. They argue that the women's sectors at the Albanian Muslim Community should be more present at the local level to undertake joint initiatives with civil society organizations, especially those that focus on women (Brucaj, 2020).

Eventually, after the fall of the communist system, Albania has gone through a long period of transition over three decades. This transitory period in Albania has been accompanied by political, economic, and cultural instability, with a fragile government where organized crime, human trafficking, narcotics, or other psychosocial factors have produced various acts of violence, both inside and outside the country, where Albanians have been involved in various crimes or criminal networks (Azinović, V, Storr. K, 2017). Many countries were unprepared to face the phenomenon of violent extremism that leads to terrorism. The war in Syria has become a hotbed and a virus for the whole world for more than a decade. The hot wave of foreign fighters leaving Albania and traveling to Syria coincides with the period 2010–2013, a period in which the ISIS organization was still unknown. Political, socio-economic factors, intertwined with the ideological aspect, open calls to support the Syrian people in the civil war, influenced/were used to recruit foreign men/women fighters. Factors that have encouraged individuals to travel directly to conflicted zones are different, also dictated by the local context. The analysis of these factors, specifically for Albanian women, shows that these factors and the role of women who have fled to conflicted countries vary both within the region and beyond. Unlike other women recruiters and participants in the war, the role of Albanian women has been passive, and their “recruitment” has taken place within the family context, mainly influenced by their husbands.

Dominant factors in this analysis include the still prevailing patriarchal norms in society and families, mainly in rural areas of the country, lack of economic independence of women and consequently, their “dependence” on their husbands, or personal reasons related to feelings, emotions, the structure of marriage which begins with what is called the marital alliance of the traditional Albanian society and religious ideology. They depend too much on their husbands and follow their decisions or obey their decisions regardless of conditions (Doja, 2018). The idealism that characterized not only women but also men for a better life both economically and ideologically made it possible for the male fighters to be joined by their wives or even their parents. Again, this fact highlights the traditional model of the Albanian family that is driven by the statement of being united and ready to fight for each other's ideals. One interviewee (the sister of a male foreign fighter) declared that her sister in law joined in the war and followed her husband together with his parents (mother and father in law) and the two children. The fighter's wife has been killed, and the parents with two children have remained in Kurdish camps³¹. Last but not least is social pressure and prejudice, which has influenced some of the women to feel excluded from society because of their Islamic religion and outfit³².

31 Interview with the sister of a foreign fighter killed in Syria, (November 08, 2019). Interview with the sister of a foreign fighter killed in Syria, (November 08, 2019).

32 This statement is highlighted by almost all the interviews with relatives of women returnee and of the foreign fighters. This statement is highlighted by almost all the interviews with relatives of women returnee and of the foreign fighters.



DE-RADICALIZATION, RE-INTEGRATION, AND REHABILITATION OF WOMEN IN ALBANIA, BETWEEN FEAR AND HOPE

De-radicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DRR) are as challenging and complex issues as preventing and countering violent extremism. Governments have increasingly committed themselves to preventing and countering violent extremism and so-called “foreign fighters” and the returnees from war zones, Syria, and Iraq. Since 2015, the Global Counterterrorism Forum has brought to attention the need for governments and communities to pay attention in assessing the risk from radicalized people, foreign fighters and in the long-term perspective on their rehabilitation and reintegration into society, part or not of the justice system (GCTF, 2015-2016).

The term “de-radicalization” does not yet have a precise definition and academic agreement, as do the terms “radicalization” and “violent extremism.” Widely, “de-radicalization” has been accepted as a process in which the ideology of an extremist group is rejected, just as Dr. Alex P. Schmid defines the term as a “change of mind,” referring to the cognitive rejection of values, certain behaviors, and views (Schmid, 2013). John Horgan also defines de-radicalization as a social and psychological process where the commitment, involvement of an individual in extreme violent behavior is reduced to such an extent that there is no longer a risk of re-involvement and re-engagement in extremist acts (Horgan, 2008). On the other hand, it is worth noting the difference between the terms “de-radicalization” and “disengagement” (Horgan, J., Braddock, K., 2012). So, “disengagement” refers to the prohibition of committing an act, while a so-called “radical” person can stop committing an extreme act of violence or his participation in terrorist groups, without questioning or repenting for radical views” (Bertram, 2015). Also, “disengagement” can lead to major changes in social and cognitive behaviors, such as social norms, values, behaviors, and aspirations that were previously shared between members of the same group (Horgan, 2008) while de-radicalization goes beyond “disengagement.” While countries are preparing to address de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of people who have been in war zones, Bertram argues that there is no standard work plan that can address these issues. Still, there are several models which can be adapted to specific contexts and, above all to particular individuals (Bertram, 2015), further adding that within individual de-radicalization programs, the latter must be based on the perspectives of individuals, their beliefs, and motives to join a terrorist group or some kind of extremist ideology. As such, a successful de-radicalization initiative should be a journey that goes through the same trajectories as the radicalization process.

Despite the challenges and complexity that characterizes DRR, women are still left behind where far the most de-radicalization programs are designed for men, and there has been little effort to create programs that specifically address the needs of women returnees (Turkington, R., Christien, A., 2018).

Albania is in the early stages of assessing the potential threats that foreign fighters may pose and drafting DRR programs. Shtuni distinguishes between the danger and the threat that foreign fighters may pose, saying that “not all returnees and those returning from Syria and Iraq pose potential social and national security risks” (Shtuni, 2019). Returnees’ analysis is essential for designing rehabilitation and reintegration programs for foreign fighters. Even in this case, the phenomena are complex due to the complexity of the profiles and the reasons why foreign fighters return to their native countries (Shtuni, 2019). Shtuni emphasizes that special attention should be paid to Albanian women returnees, who are not actively involved in the fighting. Still, they can



support certain ideologies and can recruit and mobilize others to join terrorist organizations. In this case, a potential risk is closely related to the indoctrination of children. Moreover, some individuals return from conflict areas with trauma and psychological problems, and if not diagnosed, they may pose a social risk not necessarily related to terrorism (Shtuni, 2019). Another potential risk of non-drafting or incomplete drafting of DRR programs is that these individuals may seek to re-go to war zones or consider rejoining extremist or ideologies groups due to disappointment, which can be experienced by social exclusion and that of the government (Tare, 2020). The role that women will play in preventing violent extremism can be defined based on the motives for that women's return: they can become positive models or they can become women who can return with extremist ideologies and try to spread them³³. Also, inadequate reintegration can reinforce fear and prejudice in the community, driving increased extremist ideologies and even re-radicalization³⁴.

Across all the Western Balkans countries, the existing data show that about 190 women have traveled to Syria and Iraq, of which only 17 have returned (from Bosnia, Kosovo, and Montenegro) (ICAN, 2019). Women and children from the Western Balkans comprise a high percentage (up to 55%) of the total number of people (including men) from the Western Balkan Countries that have traveled to Syria/Iraq, compared to the European average with approx. 35% (UNODC, 2019). The lack of accurate data on the number of women who have gone to war zones and those who have returned is a challenge for society, as well as for governmental and non-governmental actors, who must be at the forefront of drafting and implementing DRR programs. Specifically, for Albania, the public data show that about 44 women and children have traveled to Syria and Iraq. Unofficial data show that 5 women have returned to Albania in the period 2013-2014, 5 other women have lost their lives, and currently, in the Al-Hol camp, there are about 17 women who want to return (Kasapi, 2020).

Based on evidence and interviews with people engaged in this issue, the qualitative analysis in this study, shows that the reason why Albanian women want to return to Albania is largely related to the disappointment with the reality they found in Syria, which was completely different from what was promised to them. Also, they want to return because they have lost their family member(s) there and have been forced to return or simply have been lucky to have returned (Hide, 2019). Also, the disappointment they have experienced is accompanied by a highlighted feeling of remorse (Gjinishi, 2020). At the same time, they have experienced a severe psychological state; they feel guilty and do not want to talk about the time they spent in the camps in Syria when occupied by ISIS. As the second husband of the woman returnee, Mira testifies: "I do not want to ask my wife regarding her past in Syria not only in respect of her figure, integrity, and personality but also because she does not want to talk about that period."³⁵

The testimonies of Albanian women currently living in the Al-Hol camp show that they are "victims" of going and staying there. They have a desperate call for the Albanian government to at least make it possible for Albanian children to return, in case the government fears that they are indoctrinated and can pose a risk to the country (Kasapi, 2020). The passive role that Albanian women have in Syria and Iraq is also confirmed by a man returnee, originally from Shkodra, who gave an interview to the Albanian journalist Taulant Kopliku. He stated that Albanian women simply followed their husbands and stayed inside the house, unlike women from the Republic of Kosovo, among which several women have been part of the so-called "Caliphate Police" (Kopliku, 2020). The testimonies so far by the Albanian women and children who live in the Al-Hol camp show their will to return to Albania. They have been left alone without the Albanian government's support, which has also been confirmed by the camp authorities, who have stated that they have not been contacted by the Albanian authorities to enable the return of these people (Bajrami, 2019).

33 Interview with members of the Security Council, Korca, (March 4, 2020).

34 Correspondence with Melinda Holmes, reviewer of this study, July 2020.

35 Interview with the husband of the returned woman Mira (23 January 2020)



Albanian women's role in Syria and Iraq is significant and determines, to some extent, their progress and integration in Albania. First, with the amendments to the Penal Code passed by the government in 2014 as part of repressive measures taken in facing violent extremism (Arbnori, 2015), most women (but also men) have ambiguities about how they will be treated by the government when they return and fear the prosecution based on the criminal code. As is the case with a woman named Mira, who managed to return before the penal code changes were approved, leaving Syria has been an even more significant trauma than staying there. In addition to the fears and vicissitudes of the way back, "I returned to my hometown with an even greater fear, with the fear of the government. The fear that (the police) could take the children and me from time to time has made me live in real horror"³⁶. For this purpose, returnees from war zones need to be analyzed and approached on a case-by-case basis and should be divided into different categories because "not every person who has been in those areas may not pose a risk, but in general Albanian women have not played an active role in combat or recruitment" (Dembati, 2020). However, in general, all interviewees consider Albanian women "victims" and recommend that individual programs must be created for each of them and the children in order to reintegrate them into society entirely. The importance of de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of the people returned from Syrian camps is essential for the returnees' families' safety and well-being and the communities. On the contrary, leaving them out of socio-economic perspective and psychologically non-treated will jeopardize the return of these individuals to their previous life or push their involvement in criminal activities. Such is the case of a returnee who was arrested because he possessed combat ammunition, or in another case in Tirana who was convicted on charges of physical and psychological violence towards his wife (Gjinishi, 2020). Regarding other returned Albanians, the interviews with experts in the field do not reveal other similar cases, which is also due to the lack of information and the refusal of the responsible institutions to provide information.

Difficulties women may face in their return and perceptions of the danger they may pose in Albania

The difficulties and challenges that women who have been in the war camps in Syria and Iraq face and will face are great and complex. They are related to their aggravated psychological condition, their economic situation, the level of unemployment, housing, education, their children's integration, and the level of social acceptance.

The support of the nuclear family is critical and decisive in coping with return and living, as is the case of Mira, who shows how facilitating the support provided by her family has been for her. As Mira's close friend says: "Her family has helped her a lot. She was very close to her family and found the warmth needed by her family. If I had run away, my family would not have welcomed me or supported me like that. Her brother has paid a large sum of money for her (woman returnee Mira) to return, as she traveled alone to Syria and returned alone after her husband died there."³⁷

In the whole context of these women and children's return, the identification of problems again requires individual psychological and socio-economic analysis (Dembati, 2020). These strategies should have been developed long ago, and their unsuccessful implementation and even greater disappointment that these people will face from the government and society can push these women and children to be a potential danger (Gjura, 2020). In contrast, these women can become positive role models and valuable contributors to the education of new generations and prevent the violent extremism phenomenon (Gajda, 2019).

36 Woman named Mira testimony interview, (January 16, 2020).

37 Interview with Woman Mira's best friend, (January 5, 2020).



Another significant danger is social prejudice “like the black sheep in the community,” which can have consequences on psychological health, unemployment, and the lack of integration of themselves and their children in society (Bajrami, 2019). This social exclusion forces them to no longer live in the former residential areas, migrating to other cities to escape the city’s reality where they were born and raised before leaving for Syria and Iraq. This is the case of our interviewee in this study, who states:

“I was powerless and tired, but only for my children, I began to rebuild my life alone. With the help of the family, I reopened my small business in my hometown, but I am bearing the community’s prejudices and being psychologically burdened. The thought of being judged as a terrorist has haunted me constantly. Even my children have faced difficult situations from their peers, which is why I decided to change the city after living for 2-3 years in this situation.”³⁸

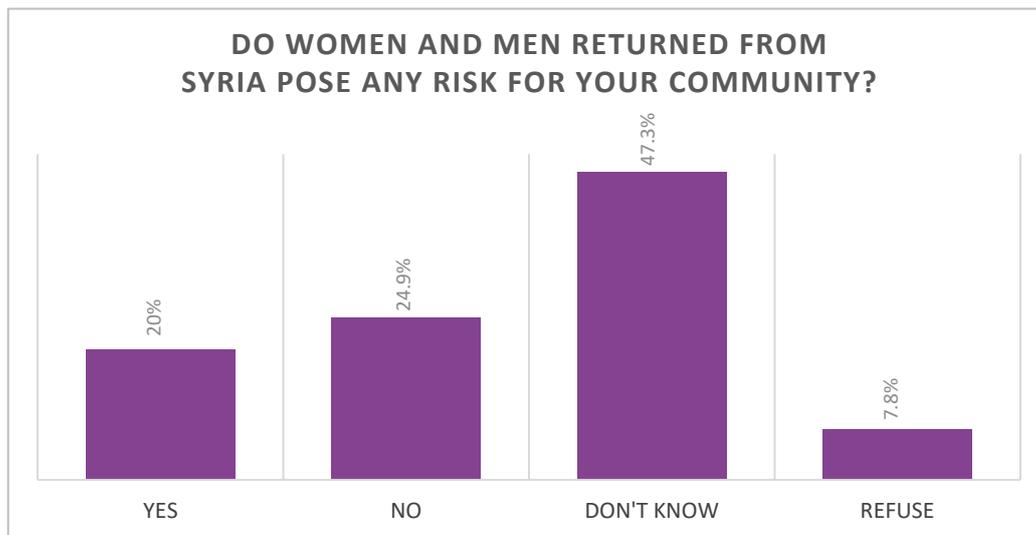


Chart no. 12

Another girl who currently is in the camp in Syria says she fears how she will be accepted in Albania after returning. The journalist Taulant Koplaku states that “Unfortunately, the Albanian society will find it difficult to accept them, as I have noticed that there is a lot of hatred towards the people in the camps. In the case of Alvin Berisha³⁹ they have expressed a lot of hatred through comments on social networks. Therefore, Albanian society is much unprepared to accept them, and much preparatory work should be done with the communities (Koplaku, 2020).

The respondents in this study were asked two questions about their perceptions of whether the people (men and women) returned from Syria and Iraq pose a threat, first to their community (see chart no. 12) and second to the national security as a whole (see chart no. 13). In both cases, the people who think that “returnees” pose a threat have more or less the same percentage, and there is no high difference in terms of their gender distribution.

Between the two questions, there is a higher percentage of the people who think that returnees do not pose a threat to national security, compared to those who believe that these people don’t pose any risk at the community level.

However, in both cases, observations show a high percentage of respondents who do not have information on this issue. The highest percentage is observed regarding the risk that the returnees pose at the community level (47.3%) compared to the potential risk of these people for national security (38.1%). This high percentage among respondents is related to their lack of knowledge

38 Interview with Mira, (January 16, 2020).

39 Albanian child released from Camp Al-Hol in November 2019



and information regarding the reasons why these people traveled to the war zones, regarding the role they have played as well as the government’s approach towards these people⁴⁰.

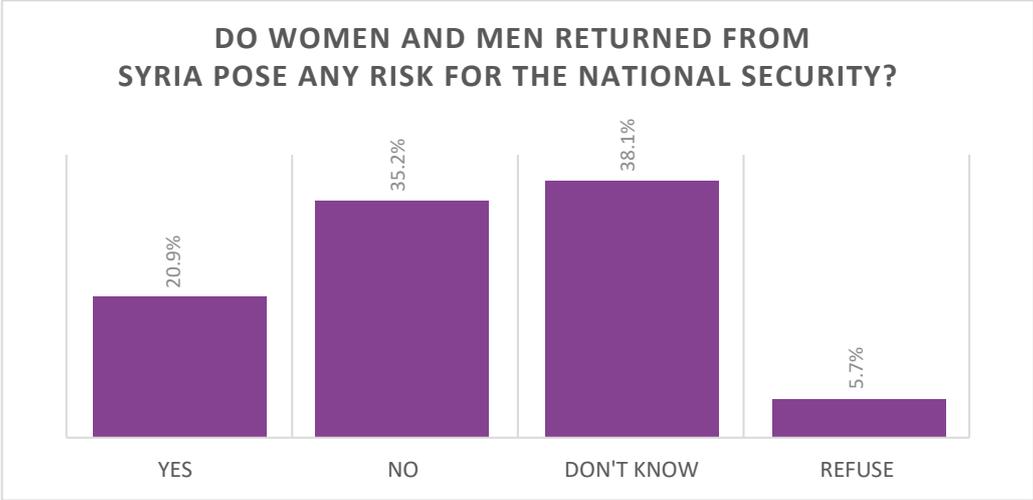


Chart no. 13

Information from the local communities shows that the society has not yet accepted the returnees before 2014, especially in rural areas, so most of them have moved to large cities, where their past is not known. They are not feeling or being prejudiced, as is the case of a woman who refuses to be contacted by anyone since she may be targeted by society⁴¹. Communities/citizens have very little information about their community’s people/women that left for Syria and Iraq, as well as about their return. As can be seen in chart no. 14, only 7.6% of female respondents and 8.7% of male respondents have information about both men and women that have traveled to foreign battlefields.

These values are slightly higher among the female survey’s population when asked if they have information only about women who have traveled to Syria/Iraq (10.5% female respondents and 8% of male respondents) (see chart 15).

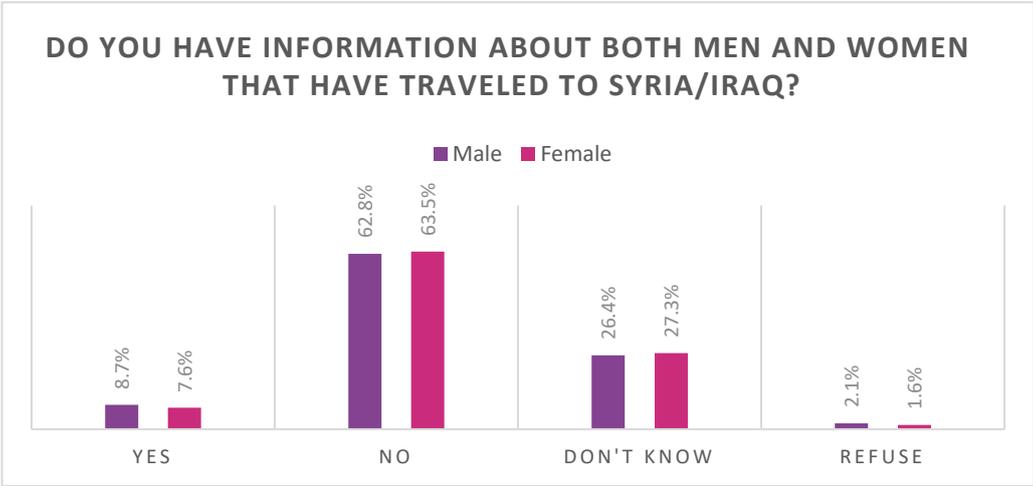


Chart no. 14

40 Author’s note: This statement is based on the opinions shared by the civil society representatives during the focus group discussions.

41 Participants in this focus group discussion include representants from the municipality of Pogradec, teachers, high school students, representatives of health care institutions, journalists, religious community representatives, (January 9, 2020).



Chart no. 15

On the other hand, a high percentage of the survey's respondents report that they do not have information. For both questions, the rates are higher than 60% of the surveyed population. From a geographic perspective of the surveyed population, respondents who have information on women who have traveled to Syria/Iraq come from urban areas (10.7% of the surveyed population), compared to 7.1% of the surveyed rural population regions. At the regional level, the highest percentage of respondents that do have such information is from the regions of Dibra (37.5% of survey's respondents), Korca (16.1% of survey's respondents), Fier (18.2% of survey's respondents), and Tirana (6.3% of survey's respondents) (chart no. 16).

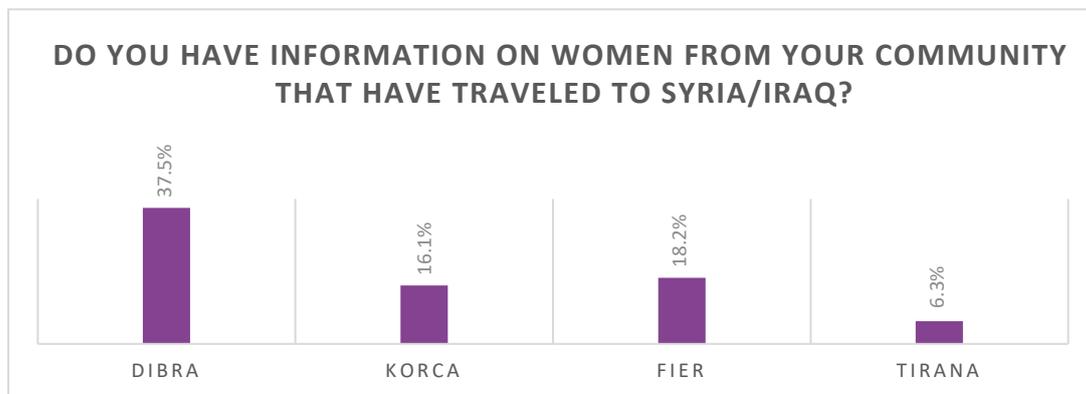


Chart no. 16



Regarding the level of information of the surveyed population concerning women returnees in terms of information on their return, only 2.5 % of male respondents and 4.8% of female respondents confirm to have information, and a slight majority of them come from urban areas (4.1 % respondents from urban areas and 3.2% from rural regions). The percentage of people that do not have information on this topic is for both genders above the average of 70% (Chart no. 17).

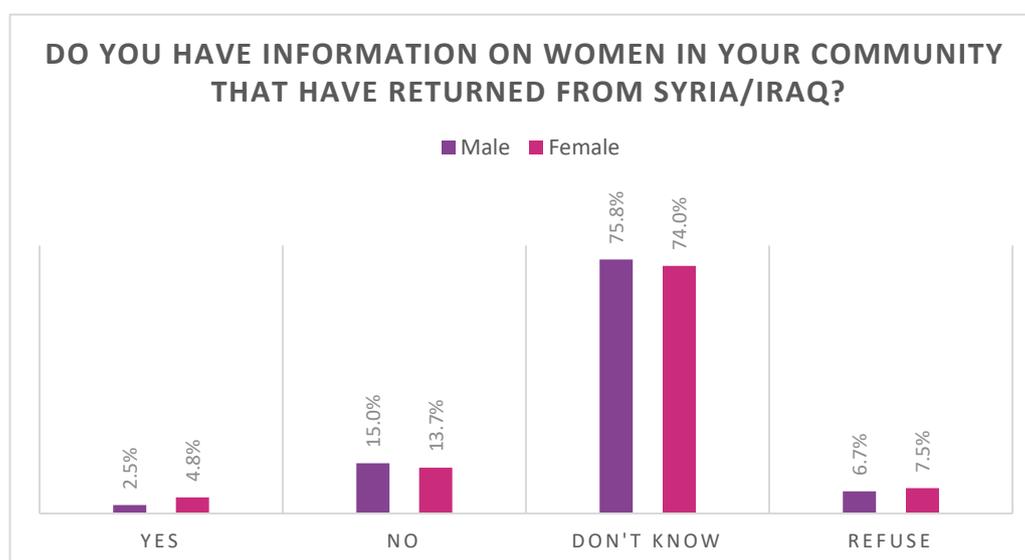


Chart no. 17

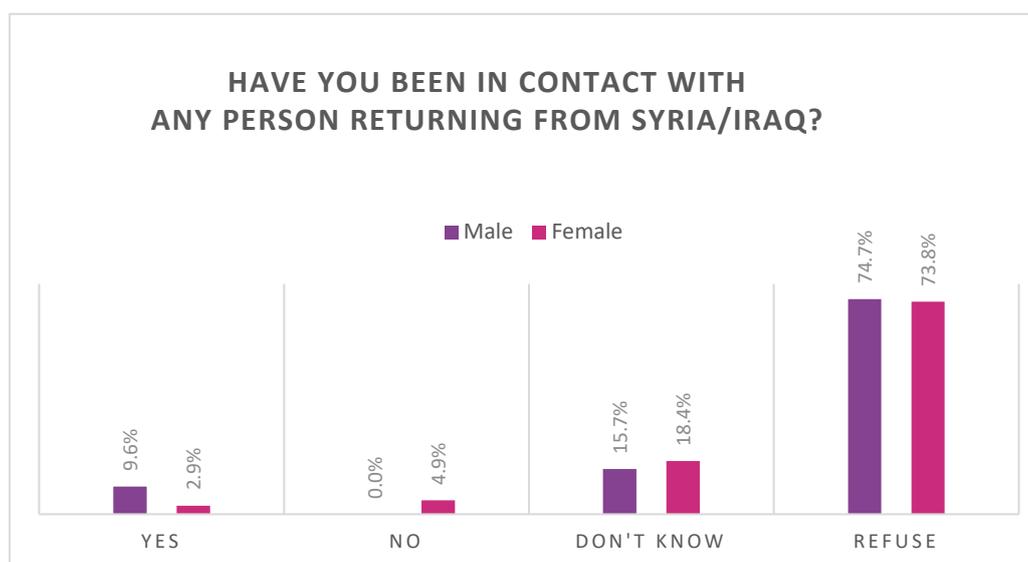


Chart no. 18

There is a high percentage among respondents that refused to answer (74.7% - male and 73.8% - female) the question of whether they have contacted any person returning from Syria/Iraq (see chart no. 18), versus those who have stated that they have contacted these people, respectively 9.6% of male respondents and 2.9% of female respondents.

Regarding the level of acceptance of returnees by the community, 18% of the respondents (20.7% of male respondents and 15.7% of female respondents) think they are welcomed. At higher percentages, 21.6% of the survey's respondents show that these people are not welcomed by the community (25.2% of male respondents and 18.7% of female respondents), chart no.19. However, even in this case, the highest percentage of respondents do not have information on this issue, comprising 54.7% of the surveyed population. Based on the residence of the survey's



respondents, most of the people who share the opinion that returnees are not accepted from their communities come from urban areas- 26.8%, compared to those from rural areas 13% (See chart no. 20).

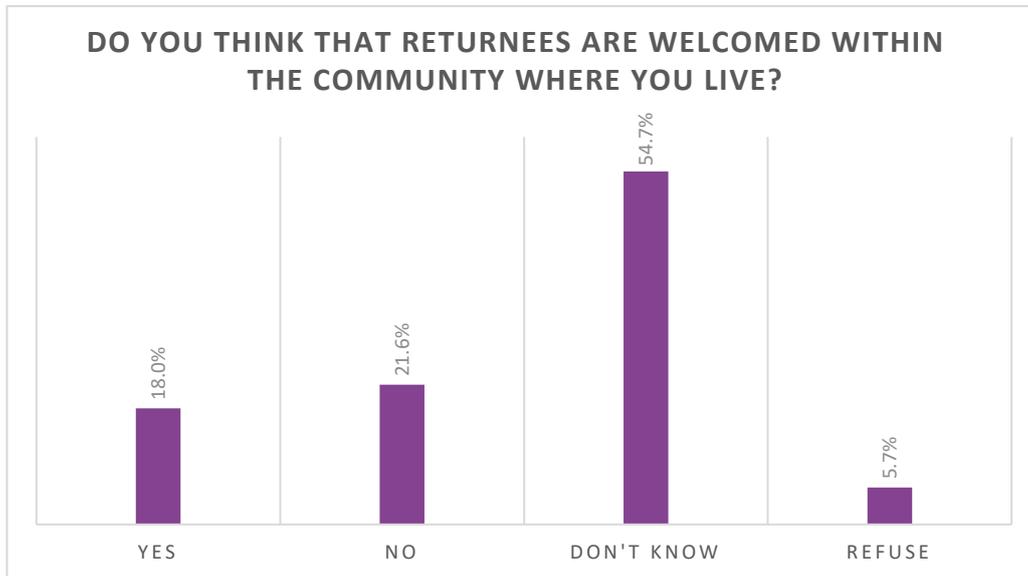


Chart no. 19

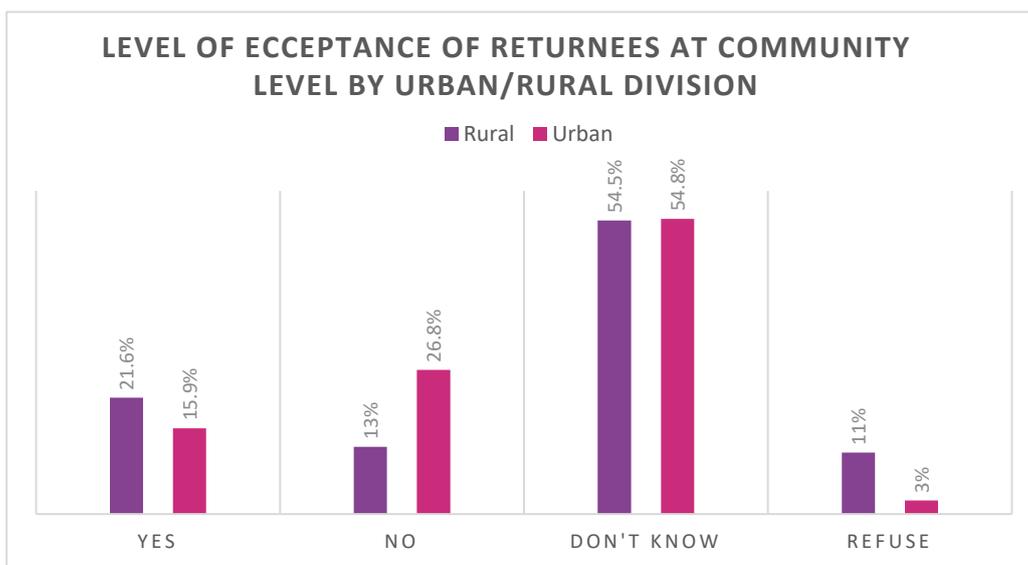


Chart no. 20

Focus group participants do not rule out that “returnees” may pose a danger, which may be manifested in the form of incitement to hatred, violence, extremist religious ideology, or the recruitment of other individuals. However, women and children are being considered as a marginalized group who will not pose a risk if they are reintegrated by communities and governmental institutions (Gjoni, 2020). In fact, 59.1% of the surveyed population believes that the returnees can be reintegrated in society (see chart no. 21). When asked about differences between rural and urban areas, the civil society representatives state that the biggest problem stands in rural areas, where prejudice and religious differences are very high, such as the case of a school between a village inhabited by Muslims and another village inhabited by Catholics. In this school, there are often prejudices between children due to religious beliefs. Because of this, representatives of the Catholic and Muslim religions of the respective areas have been asked



from time to time to have conversations with children regarding religious coexistence. In these contexts, with high religious-based prejudices, a child or family returning from Syria will find themselves in very difficult situations (Valente, 2019).

Recommendations for societal inclusion in DRR

Representatives of civil society organizations in the country, mostly engaged in local communities regarding violent extremism, as one of the most important actors in P/CVE, emphasize that attention should not be focused only on returnees in order to avoid possible prejudices. On the contrary, the messages given against VE and the reintegration of returnees, especially towards women and children, should serve to raise awareness, especially on local communities and the families of returnees⁴². The latter is the main pillar for reintegration. “In the cases when the family does not accept them, reintegration fails, and in this context, families should be the actors to be contacted as the first steps in the drafting of the return strategies, as the first ally not only of government institutions’ work but also of the community and society civil organizations” (Vurmo, 2019).

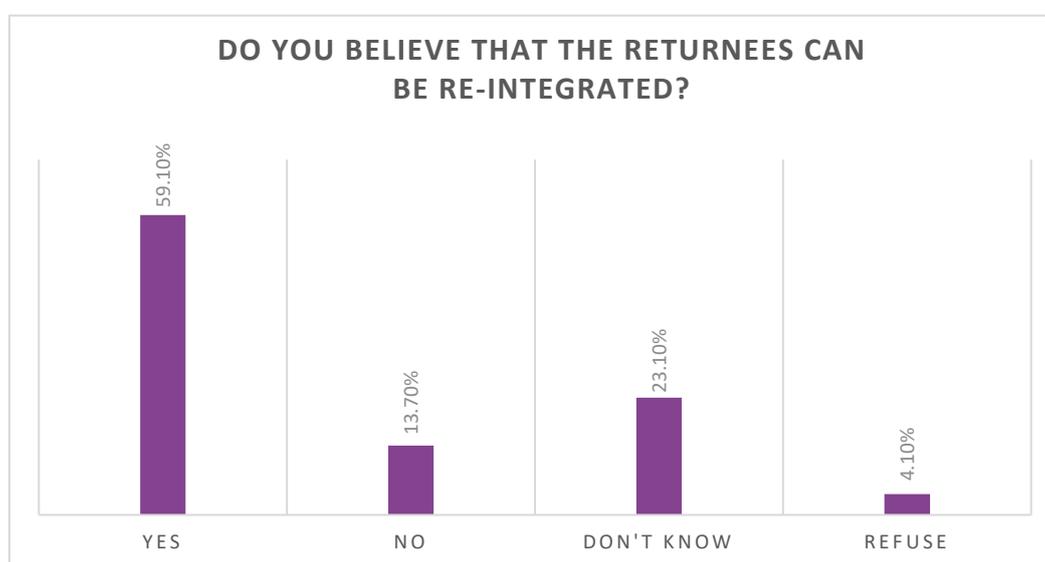


Chart no. 21

DRR requires a multi-actor approach, starting from the psychological treatment of women, children, and families, creating employment opportunities, involvement in children’s education, increasing the capacity of educational institutions in order to face the category of children returnees, also increasing the provision of psycho-social service in school and the family as well as the awareness of the community and its preparation for this phenomenon (Gajda, 2019). Representatives of CSOs say that society will be scared, and the government should have the primary responsibility. Furthermore, they highlight that it can be harmful and risky if the returned people are left alone to integrate themselves into society. Representatives from CSOs mainly engaged in women’s rights state that “the women returnees might become positive models for the society and the prejudices or fears that arise when we hear the word “ISIS” must be extinguished”(FGD, 2020). A good example is the case showed by a community member in Vlora city who says: “In our city, there were many Jews, as in all of Albania. The local community protected them because we knew what they had gone through. So, if we know what these women have done, we will be close to them⁴³”.

⁴² Focus group discussion meeting with the network of CSOs against CVE, (February 20, 2020).

⁴³ Participants in this focus group include local actors in Vlora municipality such as: high school representatives, teachers, students, CSOs, representatives from shelters, youth groups, members of the Security Council, Vlora, (January 24, 2020)



In this context, all cases of returnees should be separately analyzed in order to properly address their problems and needs and to properly design individual plans for each of these women and their children. The experience so far in Albania shows that there is a lack of support for women returnees, and no individual action plan for their DRR is applied. This is the case not only in the history of our woman returnee Mira. It is also the case of another woman who, as stated from the representatives in the FGD meeting in Tirana, has returned to Albania with her two children and pregnant with another child, who has been in serious psychological and economic condition, and her mother raised the children as the only person that gave her support”.⁴⁴

Although the phenomenon of violent extremism in Albania has been kept under control since 2014 until today (Vurmo, 2019), DRR is already a challenge that Albania must face. The first step is starting with the drafting of a strategy, a clear action plan, and the relevant budget with a specific focus on women and children returnees. As a compound of these challenges (beyond psychological treatment, providing opportunities for education and employment), community approach and preparatory work with the community will be essential for the reintegration of women and children” (Kuko, 2020). In this context, working groups with all local actors should be set up in each community. They will have to follow step by step the entire case management cycle, accompanied by individual work plans, implementation of concrete measures, and monitoring case-by-case all the referred issues (Dembati, 2020).

At the end of this section, we can emphasize that the fear of the risks that women who are still in the Syrian camps may have upon their return, the fear of the behavior towards women who have already managed to return, and the general fear of the communities/citizens towards returnees is present precisely from the fact of the great unknown that exists over this group of women and about the role they have played in ISIS camps. In general, the actors in this study confirm that women together with children are victims of the phenomenon and that they have played an entirely passive role in the camp in Syria, or at least so far, there is no “alarm signal” that there might be women who are active in this framework. The measures that will be taken within their DRR are still much unknown, which makes both the institutions and the communities unprepared for the approach they should follow. At the same time, the urgent need to design a DRR strategy which should be guided by a multi-actor approach is highlighted. This strategy should work alongside preparing the awareness of local communities/citizens on these persons, with good intention -accepting them in society and avoiding prejudices, which have proven to be detrimental to the integration of women in their hometowns. In this context, the role of women returned to Albania is assessed on both sides, positive as agents of change, as well as negative (in other words, they pose a risk), and will be fully linked to the success of the design, implementation, and monitoring of individual plans for these people.

While Albania has so far refused to return the people who are still in Syrian camps, the other Balkan countries have taken steps to return them home, including Kosovo, Macedonia, and Bosnia (Hoffman, A., Furlan, M., 2020). Beyond the individual efforts of the people themselves in Syria or their families, the only way these women and children can return is through official channels. Representatives of the Albanian Foreign Ministry must prepare the necessary documentation for Albanian citizens in Syria who can reach the border with Kurdistan or Turkey by traveling 4-5 hours from the Al-Hol camp. So far, there is no response from governmental institutions as to what exactly is being done regarding the return of these people, except for the confirmation that the relevant institutions are working on this issue (Bajrami, 2019).

⁴⁴ Participants in this focus group included local actors in Tirana municipality such as: journalists, university students, university professors, researchers and VE experts Tirana, (February 1, 2020).



THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Participants in this study consider media channels as key to informing and preparing the public about women and children who want to return from war camps. “The society, the communities, need information about these women and children; promoting them as positive models will help to fade prejudices and increase acceptance in society”⁴⁵. In this context, the participants in the meetings take as an example the case of the Albanian child, A.B, which was widely covered by the Italian and Albanian media, emphasizing that “the story of this boy created a new opinion in Albanian society on how to treat these people, be they, women or children”.⁴⁶

In recent years, the use of social media by extremist groups/individuals as a means of spreading extremist propaganda or recruiting members has increased significantly. These same channels of communication have also been used by extremists to create “virtual training camps” and to share experiences and knowledge (Avis, 2016). On the other hand, actors engaged in the prevention and in countering VE have begun to use social media (mainly civil society organizations), but also traditional media as tools of counter-narrative work (Ramkaj, 2019). Countering extremist narratives is also one of the main areas of intervention of the National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism in Albania. “Opposition to extremist propaganda by supporting democratic values” states that effective strategies and techniques will be identified and strengthened to prevent the spread of extremist narrative. More specifically, civil society and religious communities, as well as the media, will rely on the design and transmission of powerful messages and alternative stories that support tolerance, peace, human rights, and democratic values through the following actions: a) Conceptualization of campaigns adapted to social media, radio and television programs, as well as other types of initiatives that share anti-extremism messages, which can reach target audiences (National Coordinator P/CVE, Albania , 2018). However, a map of these initiatives is missing (in this respect, several projects have been implemented by civil society organizations and the Muslim community in this area so far), as well as the analysis and monitoring of their success in countering extremist narratives.

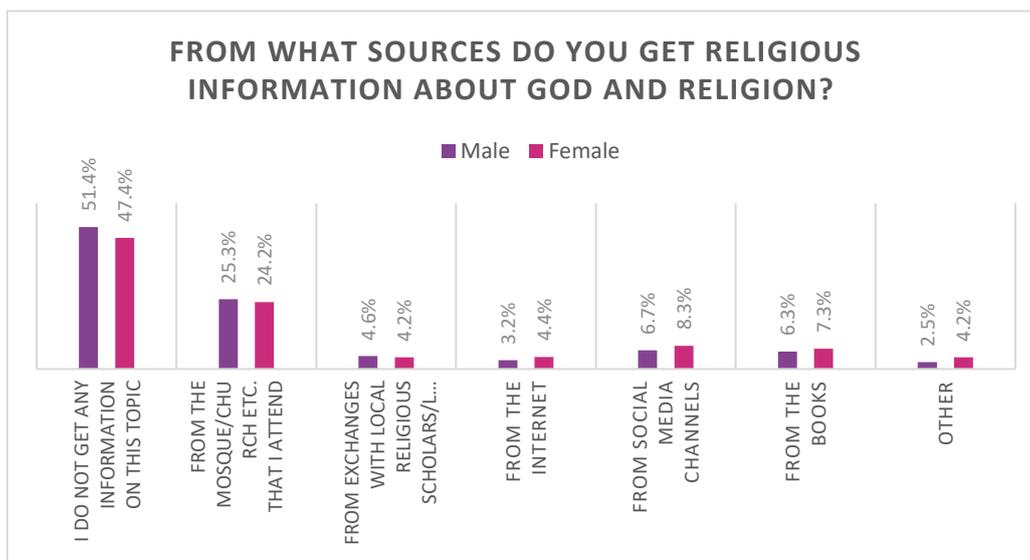


Chart no. 22

45 Participants in this focus group discussion include representatives from the municipality of Pogradec, teachers, high school students, health care institutions, journalists and religious community , (January 9, 2020).

46 Participants in this focus group discussion include representatives from the municipality of Pogradec, teachers, high school students, health care institutions, journalists and religious community , (January 19,2020) Ibid.



Respondents in this study were asked about the communication channels in which they follow both religious preachers and news in their country and abroad in general. Among the surveyed, on average, 34.2% of them follow religious preachers daily in the holy places they attend. 29.7% of this group of respondents comes from rural areas, while 20.6% are from urban areas. Additionally, about 12.5% (men and women) follow religious preachers through radio and television and 6.95% of them through online networks and social media. Meanwhile, when asked about the sources in which respondents receive religious information, on average, 24.75% of respondents claim that they receive this information by attending religious facilities. However, a significant percentage of respondents use social media and religious websites to obtain this information, respectively 7.5% of respondents use social media, and 3.8% use religious websites (chart no.22 presents figures by gender division).

When asked about the main channel they use to get information about what happens globally (chart no.23), respondents reported traditional media such as TV and radio, which make up the largest percentage as means of information. This is followed by social media with about 44.8%. A significant difference is noticeable between rural and urban areas where the use of newspapers, social media, and online news portals is lower than the use of the same channels in urban areas. Other information channels, such as TV/Radio and news from other people, are more common among communities in rural areas rather than in those in urban ones.

The latest report, “Trust in Governance 2019,” shows that television remains the most popular media source for the latest news on current affairs (57.2%), especially for older generations, employees, or residents of rural areas (Vrugtman L, Bino, B, 2020). However, people are losing interest in television, especially young people. The same report shows an increase in the use of social media from 18% in 2017 to 25% in 2019. Also, the use of such portals has increased from 7% in 2018 to 12.5% in 2019, mainly by young people (Vrugtman, L., Bino, B., 2019).

All interviewees for this study report, from several state and non-state institutions, emphasize the role of the media in preventing VE by listing it among the main actors in addressing the phenomenon. However, especially in recent years, media has been facing public distrust and has often been perceived as the spokesperson of powerful economic and political actors (Vrugtman, L., Bino, B., 2019). Other problematic issues are related to the lack of capacity of journalists in addressing issues of violent extremism or missing information and data by state institutions. Given that these institutions consider violent extremism and radicalism as issues of high sensitivity to national security, they often use this as an argument not to cooperate with the media (Çela, E., 2020).

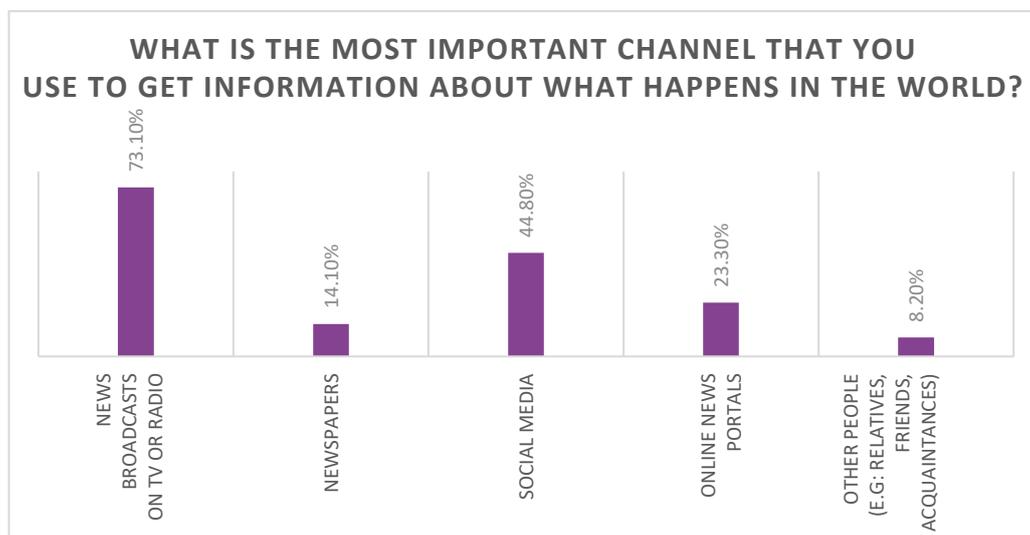


Chart no. 23



On the other hand, traditional media⁴⁷ has been perceived by the interviewees as a crucial sector, which so far has not played an entirely positive role in issues related to VE⁴⁸. In this context, it should improve its function by not seeking sensation or spreading panic; instead, it should play an explanatory role of the phenomenon by using a simple language and being as close to communities as possible (Çela, 2019). However, civil society organizations working with the media should focus more on their work not only on increasing the capacity of journalists in cases of violent extremism and revisiting their role, not only informing the public but instead raising public awareness on this phenomenon and those returning from war zones.⁴⁹

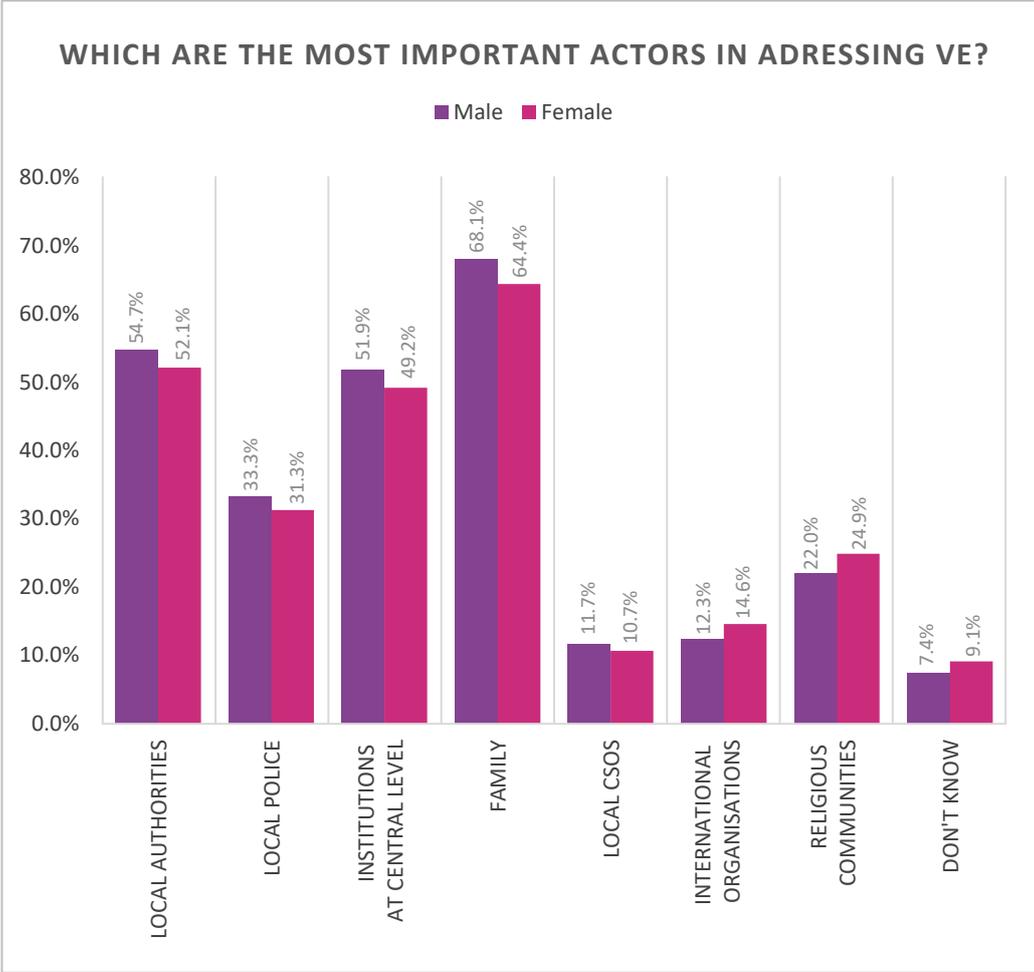


Chart no. 24

In the context of returnees, participants in the meetings think that especially communities in small, rural, isolated areas, where social prejudices are higher, are greatly influenced by the information and arguments given by the media in this regard. “The society does not withstand the media war, and the daily media phenomenon has made society “protect itself” against foreign fighters and not only that, but it has also created a feeling of Islamophobia, which is quite obvious in Albanian society” (Ramkaj, 2019). This fact is also confirmed by the husband of the returned woman Mira, who says that his wife feels the same prejudices that Muslims experience from certain sectors of the society, including the media⁵⁰.

47 Television, radio and press.
48 Participants in this focus group included local actors in Tirana municipality such as: journalists, university students, university professors, researchers and VE experts Tirana, (February 1, 2020).
49 Participants in this focus group discussion include representatives from the municipality of Pogradec, teachers, high school students, health care institutions, journalists and religious community , (January 9, 2020).
50 Interview with Woman’s X husband of the returnee, (January 23, 2020).



As noted in other sections of this report, the majority of respondents consider women to be victims of the VE phenomenon, largely due to their husbands' manipulation. Therefore, participants in meetings share the opinion that the media should generally view these women and children as "victims". Indeed, institutions should offer their help and expertise when categorizing them (into victims or not)⁵¹.

There is a limited number of studies and analyses in Albania related to the online radicalization of the people, while there is no analysis at all covering women's online radicalization. However, as the data available for this study report show, it turns out that no women from Albania have traveled to Syria influenced by extremist online propaganda. Nevertheless, the analysis made a few years ago of about 270 messages of online propaganda sites in Albanian or translated into Albanian on Facebook and other online platforms have shown that the Albanians were one of the most targeted groups for recruitment by ISIS by using forms of communication such as video messages and specific messages for Albanians only, or in other cases for "Muslims of the Western Balkans" (Zhilli, F., Çibuku, E., Koplaku, I., Graceni, E., Malaj, A., 2015).

51 Participants in this focus group discussion include representatives from the municipality of Pogradec, teachers, high school students, health care institutions, journalists and religious community, (January 9, 2020).



INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

The leading policy document in which Albania addresses the issue of radicalization and violent extremism is the National Strategy of PCVE adopted in 2015 (National Coordinator P/CVE, Albania, 2018), as a first response of the country beyond the security sector, after the legal changes made in the Penal code in 2014. Thus, it is based on a multi-sectorial approach between different institutions focusing on education, social services, local government institutions, and a wide range of non-governmental actors (such as CSOs and religious communities) at the national and local levels (National Coordinator P/CVE, Albania, 2018). For this purpose, the activities implemented within the action plan of this strategy have reached mass awareness among the employees of the front line in educational institutions, law enforcement institutions, representatives of local government and religious communities, considering this category as “trustworthy voices” who work more closely with the respective communities (Kuko, 2020).

The role of women and girls in violent extremism is vaguely discussed in this policy document and its action plan. The CVE National Strategy mentions the empowerment of women in countering VE under the priority of “Community Extension and Engagement,” emphasizing: “Supporting public and private initiatives that create employment opportunities, social entrepreneurship and economic empowerment of women in target hotspots” (National Coordinator P/CVE, Albania, 2018). Gender experts in this study report share the opinion that “gender issues do not necessarily have to be addressed independently” (Bozo, 2019), but they should be priority issues addressed in all aspects of the strategy. However, this strategy views women as vulnerable categories only under the heading of “socio-economic factors,” leaving behind other factors influencing violent extremism (mentioned in the section above).

From the data of the studies for VE in Albania so far, it results that women are not just a vulnerable group, but they are also a group that can become a powerful preventive factor. This is a somehow less present element in the existing strategy and action plan; however, if we look at the Coordinating Actions of the Center against VE, a kind of sensitivity is observed in gender issues (Vurmo, 2019). Experts in the field highlight the role of women within the family even in addressing other phenomena such as domestic violence, which is quite worrying due to the Albanian family’s patriarchal and traditional context (Hide, 2019). Also, they emphasize women’s role in the vanguard of stopping men from leaving their families and traveling to war zones, where the latter (radicalized and misinformed about Islam) must obtain the approval of the family, especially the mother or wife (Hide, 2019). Also, women need to be well-informed about the radicalization process, as they can be the “front line” in distinguishing the beginnings of radicalization⁵². Shortcomings in addressing gender issues on VE are also noticed in the lack of assistance and support for women who lost their husbands or their children in Syria (Gjinishi, 2020). Thus, gender analysis in a given context, based on differences between opportunities, resources, challenges that women and men face independently, not only creates the opportunity to understand the motives why these two categories approach violent extremism but also helps to compile appropriate gender-centered programs (OSCE, 2019). So, after this general understanding that women play an important role in preventing violent extremism and that they need to be empowered, there is no concrete analysis or action plan on how women can contribute to preventing and

52 Participants in this focus group included local actors in Elbasan municipality such as: representatives from religious communities (Muslim, catholic, orthodox, protestant), representatives from the municipality and the municipal security council, psychologists, teachers, local CSOs working on women and youth issues, Elbasan, (February 20, 2020).



counteracting this phenomenon, thus making it difficult to implement the current strategy from a gender perspective, not only for the above reasons but also due to the lack of a general action budget plan (Bozo, 2019).

In general, the interviewees in this study are aware and are often part of the activities for implementing the action plan of the CVE strategy, especially after 2017, mainly on awareness-raising activities. However, the interviewees and participants in the discussion groups underline that “awareness and prevention are very important processes, but they are not enough to address the phenomenon fully.”⁵³

In this context, importance is given to the need to design strategies and action plans with a focus on de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of returnees and those returning from war camps, mostly women and children, for whom still there are no institutional directives. Vurmo states that “four years after 2014-2015, the phenomenon has been kept under control and the strategy has received the proper attention by the institutions and the action plan has fulfilled its role correctly. However, now is the time to move to a more sustainable approach to VE addressing, there is a need to work more within local communities, and there is a need to address the new phenomenon of returnees from war zones” (Vurmo, 2019).

Given the work done so far in the context of violent extremism, respondents and state and non-state actors were asked to assess the importance of the institutions responsible for addressing and coping with this phenomenon, based on their experiences.

As can be seen from chart no 24, 66.2 % of respondents give the family a more significant role, followed by the local authorities (53.4% of respondents), the authorities at the central level (50.05% of respondents), and by law enforcement institutions at the local level (32.3% of respondents). At slightly lower levels are further listed religious communities and national organizations.

The central institutions that are already involved in the Albanian National Strategy for P/CVE (National Coordinator P/CVE, Albania, 2018) include the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth, Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense. The interviewees and representatives during the meetings emphasized that attention is also paid to the institutions and non-state actors at the local level. The problems encountered at the local level are related to the lack of capacity or lack of stable inter-actor cooperation, as Çela states, “If civil society through projects and networks abroad has had the opportunity to increase capacity in addressing VE, there is a lack of other actors such as teachers, social workers, psychologists, or even when they are present, they lack capacities and infrastructure” (Çela, 2019). Expanding and engaging in the community is also one of the aspects that need more focus, based on positive experiences so far, such as strengthening and expanding the network “School as a community center” objective of the National Strategy CVE and especially in problematic areas (Vurmo, 2019). Strengthening the local communities takes on particular importance among all people involved in the study, especially in the context of reintegration and rehabilitation of people coming from war zones, as two processes to be carried out within a specific community, where the citizens/residents themselves and the local government must be leaders in the orientation and support of returned families, while other institutions at the central level and CSOs should be their supporters (Gajda, 2019). One of the most recent studies on the engagement of civil society in countering VE states that local communities lack information on the phenomenon, risk factors, groups, and above all, on the policies and institutional measures available (Aliaj, 2018). The respondents also emphasize the need for the implementation of P/CVE programs

53 Participants in this focus group included local actors in Tirana municipality such as: journalists, university students, university professors, researchers and VE experts, Tirana, (February 1, 2020).



in this study, where respectively 70.1% of men and 65.8% of women claim it (chart no 25).

Various CSOs in the country have been engaged in recent years in projects on addressing VE. However, they have been focused only in some areas of the country and not expanding throughout the territory, thus making the results of these interventions unstable and not long-lasting (Aliaj, 2018). On the other hand, there should be more “division of tasks” and coordination even between CSOs. In this context, respondents emphasize the role of greater involvement of CSOs that are already working on gender issues, those that work with children as well as religious communities, and above all, women’s sectors of all religious faiths in the country⁵⁴.

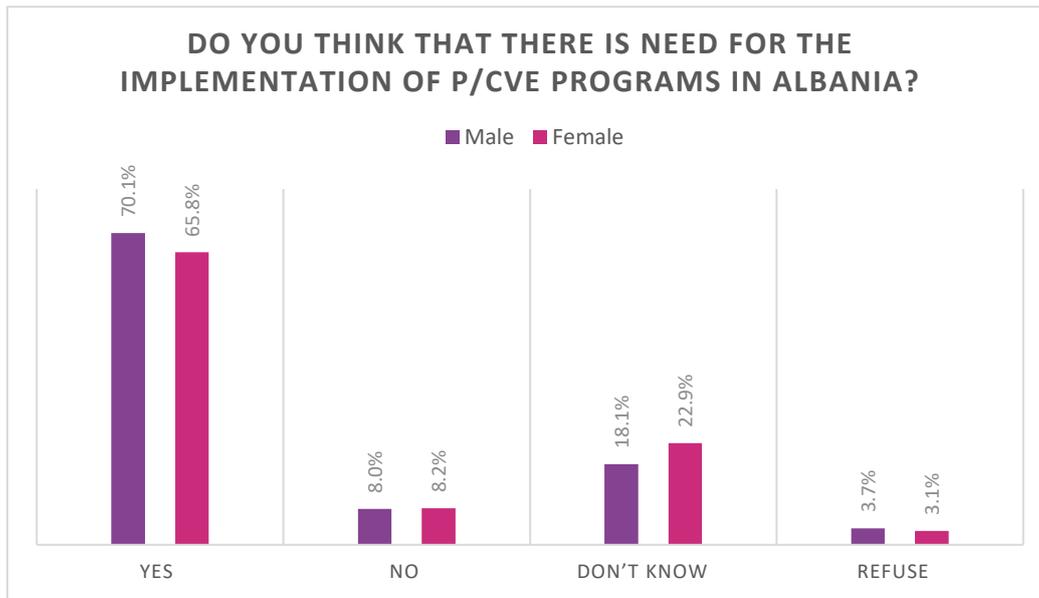


Chart no. 25

Strengthening communities is one of the main pillars for preventing the VE phenomenon on a sustainable basis. This is a much-needed intervention at a time when Albania has already passed the “emergency phase” (to which the CVE Strategy responded) and where the need arises for the creation of sustainable concrete strategic initiatives (Vurmo, 2019). Expanding awareness and informative activities widely in Albania by including important groups such as youth, women, religious communities, not necessarily only in the so-called “hot” areas, is crucial. It is also of great importance for the cases of people leaving for Syria or Iraq, where extreme isolation of some regions has also been an instigating factor in promoting radicalism and violent extremism (Hide, 2019).

All interviewees appreciated the current cooperation of all actors, especially with the CSOs. However, more attention should be paid to the interaction and coordination of interventions between institutions themselves, mainly those at the local level as stated by the Commissioner Against Discrimination, saying that: “The range of institutions is wide, but this is not just a matter of involvement, it is a matter of coordination between institutions and other actors (Gajda, 2019).

Educational institutions (through the “School as a Community Center” approach) among respondents are of particular importance in implementing a range of activities that can simultaneously bring together parents, students, representatives of local institutions, civil society organizations, and youth groups. From a gender perspective, in these activities with these institutions, teachers’ work should be brought to attention (since in Albania most teachers are

54 Participants in this focus group included local actors in Tirana municipality such as: teachers, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, members of the National Forum of CSOs in PVE in Albania. Tirana, (February 20,2020).



female), with students without a doubt and with their mothers as well, who are also the ones who follow the performance of children in schools.⁵⁵

As stated by the OSCE, including women in all VE addressing processes, including the security sector, is essential. The special potential of women in dealing with Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism (VERLT) has often been overlooked and sometimes limited to stereotyped roles (OSCE ODIHR, 2013). Law enforcement institutions, alongside other institutions, should improve how they address gender issues, but understanding the role and concrete commitment of women has been generally and vaguely accepted. This is mainly associated with the generic definition that women belong to vulnerable groups, and so do the young people.⁵⁶ The “community policing” is a widely-implemented approach addressing P/CVE issues in Albania. The respondents emphasize the need for engagement by law enforcement agencies to involve as many women as possible in the community. Also, broader cooperation with civil society organizations working on gender issues is required.⁵⁷ This cooperation is essential, both in obtaining information from these women as part of communities in the field of prevention and increasing their capacity to address other issues, such as domestic violence, as one of the country’s (Dembati, 2020). A civil society representative in this study suggests that law enforcement agencies should be more cooperative in identifying potential cases, coordinating work with other institutions, especially with local government units, and more open to the dissemination of information on the progress of work and data.⁵⁸ Lack of information on the progress of the implementation of the CVE National Strategy and its action plan and inaccurate data from several institutions, is emphasized by all interviewees representing civil society and the media. From time to time, this creates confusion in information between citizens or “ignorance” about what Albania and relevant institutions (at the central level and the local level) are doing to address VE, especially DRR (Bajrami, 2019).

In conclusion, preventing VE, opposing to this phenomenon, and dealing with de-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration are issues that can be successfully addressed through sustainable cooperation between institutions at the central level and especially those at the local level, together with the CSOs, the religious communities, and the community. So far in Albania, the gender dimension in the initiatives has been present mainly in the context of “women as a vulnerable group,” where there has been a lack of work with this group based on a concrete action plan, and, above all, with a concrete commitment of women and girls in a particular territory and community (Dembati, 2020).

The need for long-term and sustainable coordination and cooperation between state and non-state actors arises not only to continue preventing the VE phenomenon but, at this given moment in Albania, also to address the DRR issue, which is already an emergency for the country. In this context, addressing DRR requires the cooperation of institutions to meet many needs, such as:⁵⁹

55 Participants in this focus group included local actors in Elbasan municipality such as: representatives from religious communities (Muslim, catholic, orthodox, protestant), representatives from the municipality and the municipal security council, psychologists, teachers, local CSOs working on women and youth issues, Elbasan, (February 20, 2020).

56 Interview with Security Council representatives, Korca (March 4, 2020).

57 Participants in this focus group include local actors in Vlora municipality such as: high school representatives, teachers, students, CSOs, representatives from shelters, youth groups, members of the Security Council, Vlora, (January 24, 2020).

58 Participants in this focus group included local actors in Tirana municipality such as: journalists, university students, university professors, researchers and VE experts. Tirana, (February 1, 2020).

59 The following information is summarized by all representatives at the local level that participated to the discussion meetings.



- Psychological support – as a responsibility of the psycho-social service for families and those within the educational institutions;
- Capacity building / vocational education and employment for women- as a joint responsibility of the vocational education institutions, local government institutions, and local businesses;
- Housing support – as a central responsibility of the local and national government institutions;
- Support for community resilience – as a joint responsibility that includes all local state institutions, including the CSO, media, and religious communities;
- Health insurance support – which requires the engagement of health centers and responsible institutions at the national and local level;
- Ensure respect to human rights and personal security of returnees which will contribute to a smoother re-entry of women and children in the community's life- as a joint responsibility of several actors such as law enforcement agencies, civil society organizations, local government units and media. Under this note, building trust among local law enforcement agencies and the communities is pivotal for information sharing between these two actors and properly addressing DRR challenges of women and children returnees.

Apart from including the range of actors mentioned above, the progress of these interventions should be carefully monitored and the appropriate budgets for their implementation should be in place.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Interview with Security Council representatives, Korça, (March 4, 2020).



CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions and recommendations in this study report aim to support state institutions' representatives at the central and local levels, alongside those of security institutions. This study report was driven by the collaborative approach among institutions and actors engaged in issues of education, social integration, economic and psychological support. This report is also helpful to the civil society organizations, media, leaders of local communities, religious communities, and communities as a whole in designing concrete programs based on the needs and relevant challenges of certain areas in order to engage and strengthen women and girls, starting from the designing of these programs until their implementation and monitoring.

The National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism in Albania and the institution responsible for its implementation - the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism, has been a leader in addressing this phenomenon since 2015, also becoming a model for the entire Balkan region. However, it requires to include an additional perspective: the treatment of VE not only as a matter related to men. This requires the development of concrete plans for de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of returnees, focusing not only on men but also on women and children.

Particular importance is given to local communities in this context. In this study, the interviewees and respondents emphasize the need to design policies and implement initiatives based on the "whole-society approach both for prevention and DRR where local communities themselves need to create "safe spaces" for women and children returning from war countries.

There is a wide range of responsible institutions both at the central and local levels. They are highly suggested not only to recognize their role but also to ensure motivating coordination among themselves. Also, they are suggested to create strategic cooperation that ensures the sustainability of initiatives, especially at the local level. Increasing the gender dimension in existing P/CVE plans in addition to new ones within the DRR, will not only help in preventing the recruitment process and women from traveling to war zones/countries, but it will also improve their position in society and the family.

This study report has discovered that, as with men, there is no single factor that independently affects Albanian women's involvement in conflicted areas in Syria and Iraq. Macro-level factors, such as socio-economic and political ones, have influenced Albanian women to travel to war zones, but they did not play a predominant role. The principal factors in this analysis are patriarchal norms in society and families (mainly in rural areas of the country), lack of economic independence of women and consequently, their "dependence" on their husbands, or even personal reasons related to feelings, emotions, marriage structure and religious ideology.

Affected by deception, propaganda, and idealism that characterized not only women but also their husbands for a better and calmer life, both economically and ideologically, the whole family (wife, children, and even parents) joined their fighter family member in the conflicted areas. This fact highlights the traditional model of the Albanian family again. Last but not least, is the presence of social pressure and prejudice, which has made some women feel excluded from society because of their Islamic religious beliefs, religious practices, or even religious clothing. On the other hand, the lack of a strong religious women's community within the Albanian Muslim community has led women to believe their husbands' theological interpretations blindly. This is also due to the Albanian family structure, especially in rural areas where the husband takes all the important decisions.



Due to a lack of official public available information and data from the relevant state institutions, it is not clear if, during their participation in the dark forces of ISIS or other extremist terrorist groups in Syria, the women have committed terrorist acts. It turns out that they were just simple housewives; they regretted going there - simply followed their husbands - and they have had no prior information about the reality there. They also want to return to their country and have realized that they have made a mistake going there. This is clearly expressed during the interviews; however, it does not constitute an argument that these women do not pose a risk on their return to society or that they are not radicalized.

Under this patriarchal context, Albanian women are widely portrayed as “victims” of their husbands and as non- active participants in Syrian camps. From the information so far, it turns out that they have been housewives, expressing great remorse for going there and a great desire to return to their country. However, we have limited information to analyze the level of their radicalization, which requires the state institutions to engage with this issue in a second analysis as a measure also of the assessment of the potential risk that they may pose to society after returning to the country. The measures that will be taken within the DRR of women are still unknown, which makes both the institutions and the communities unprepared for the approach they should follow. At the same time, there is an urgent need to design a DRR strategy, and it is emphasized that a multi-actor approach should guide it. The strategy should be working in parallel and preparing the awareness of local communities/citizens on these people, aiming to accept them in society and avoiding prejudices that have proven detrimental to women’s integration in their hometowns. In this context, the role of women returned to Albania is assessed on both sides, both positive and negative (that constitute threat), and will be wholly related to the success of the design, implementation, and monitoring of individual plans for these people.

The experiences and evidence gathered for this study report, the first of the kind in Albania in addressing gender issues to prevent and counter radicalization and violent extremism, highlighted many recommendations to various state institutions and other non-state actors as stated below:

1. **Central-level state institutions** responsible for implementing the CVE National Strategy such as the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense, should analyze and evaluate the role of women and girls in their current plans. In this context, the gender dimension should play an essential role in addressing women not only as a vulnerable group in society regarding the VE phenomenon but also as a factor of change. To make this happen, the relevant institutions need to analyze the specific leading factors for women and girls towards VE and design sound action plans in this regard.
2. Although **education** itself does not emerge as one of the factors that have influenced Albanian women to travel to war zones, rather than an important element at strengthening women’s independence, education institutions and the responsible institution at the central level - the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, should continue to offer training sessions with the teaching staff and parents, as first-line employees. From a gender perspective, these training sessions should focus on issues such as domestic violence, women’s rights, and gender equality.
3. On the other hand, **religious communities** should also make an effort to strengthen women’s role within these communities. So far, women have had a supporting or secondary role in religious communities. At the same time, it is particularly important to train clergy and theological women on how to approach and reintegrate into relevant communities.

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4. **Central institutions** should start taking into account the return of women and children who are still living in Syria. Also, they should adopt comprehensive policies for their reintegration and rehabilitation.
 5. **Institutions at the central and local levels**, together with religious communities, should engage in drafting joint plans to address the de-radicalization process.
 6. **Institutions at the central and local levels, together with other non-state actors**, should cooperate with the families of foreign fighters and support them. The psychological treatment of family members of returned women toward positive parenting can be seen as the main factor in the reintegration and adaptation of children in society.
 7. **The Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism**, in cooperation with other responsible institutions and civil society actors, should promote community awareness on the role of women in PVE and significantly increase their knowledge/ information on DRR.
 8. **Local government institutions, as well as law-enforcement institutions** at the local level, are recommended to focus on analyzing and designing specific programs for relevant local contexts, integrating concrete initiatives for women and girls in communities, in DRR, and preventing VE.
 9. As a key factor in raising awareness and informing the community, **the media** should be more involved in promoting successful models in society, including returnees, in order to avoid the existing prejudices in local communities.
 10. **Expansion of interventions should be done at the national level**, not only in certain areas such as “hot areas” or remote rural areas where women and girls’ isolation is more dominant, and patriarchal structures are stronger.
 11. **Respective institutions and the business community** should promote employment initiatives for women’s economic empowerment, particularly focusing on the local and rural areas.

Given the vital role that civil society organizations engaged with gender issues play, they should build capacities on methods of how to merge the women’s issues in the framework of PVE, with a particular focus at the local level. It is also suggested that these organizations as well as the other ones should expand their activities all over the country (not focusing on the hot areas) and should be engaged more at monitoring the level of the implementation of these initiatives.



ANNEX I

Project: Examining gendered components of radicalization and violent extremism in Albania

Public Perception Survey :

The questionnaire

Hello! My name is _____. I am working as an interviewer for Woman Center for Development and Culture Albania (WCDCW). We would appreciate it if you could answer some questions regarding the perceptions and religious attitudes in Albania. In these questions, there is no right or wrong answer; we want to know your perceptions and experiences. Participation is voluntary, and your answers will be anonymous. If you accept to become part, feel free not to answer any personal questions, or you may decide not to continue the interview whenever you think so without any consequences.

At the end of the study, we are going to write a report. Everything is going to be anonymous, which means that you will not be identified as a person. The information collected during the conversation is confidential and will be used only for statistical usage.

If there is any question regarding this study, please contact us:

womancenterdca@gmail.com or +355 68 843 3665.

Data filled from the interviewer

No. of questionnaire: _____

Interviewer`s name: _____

Date: _____

Municipality: _____

Administrative Unit: _____



section i: socio-demographic data

- Q1.** Area of residence
- Rural
 - Urban
 - Peri-urban
- Q2.** Gender
- Male
 - Female
- Q3.** Age
- _____
- Q4.** Educational attainment
- No education
 - Primary school
 - Compulsory level
 - High school
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Master degree or higher
- Q5.** Civil status
- Single
 - Married
 - Divorced
 - Widow/er
 - Other_____
- Q6.** Number of children (if applicable)
- _____
- Q7.** Employment status
- In paid work working full-time (employed or self-employed)
 - Working part-time
 - Unemployed
 - In education (student)
 - Looking after home or children or other persons (not paid work)
 - Permanently sick or disabled
 - Retired
 - Other_____
- Q8.** Employment sector (if in employment)
- Public
 - Private
 - Non-profit sector



- Q9.** Which of the following would better describe how you feel about your household's income?
- a. Living comfortably on current income
 - b. Coping on current income
 - c. Finding it difficult on current income
 - d. Finding it very difficult on current income
- Q10.** Do you benefit from the financial aid program?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Refuse to answer
- Q11.** What is your individual monthly income (net)?
- a. No income
 - b. Up to 23 000 ALL
 - c. From 23 001 ALL to 50 000 ALL
 - d. From 50 001 ALL to 70 000 ALL
 - e. From 70 001 ALL to 90 000 ALL
 - f. Over 90 001 ALL
 - g. Refuse to answer
- Q12.** Are you a member of a minority group?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Refuse to answer
- Q13.** If yes, please specify.
- a. Greek
 - b. Macedonian
 - c. Aromanian
 - d. Roma
 - e. Egyptian
 - f. Montenegrin
 - g. Bosnian
 - h. Serbian
 - i. Bulgarian
 - j. Refuse to answer



section ii: belief and religion

- Q1.** Do you consider yourself to be a...?
- Muslim
 - Orthodox
 - Catholic
 - Bektashi
 - Protestant
 - Other _____
 - Refuse to answer
 - I don't consider myself belonging to a religion

IF OPTION H "I don't consider myself belonging to a religion" IS CHOSEN MOVE TO QUESTION Q2

- Q2.** In that case, would you say that you are looking for a religion that would be right for you?
- Yes, I am looking for a religion
 - No, I am not looking for a religion
 - Don't know
 - Refuse to answer
- If you got an answer for Q2, move to Section III

- Q3.** Do you belong to the same religion as your own family of origin? (*Hint: Is your religion now the same as the one you were raised in?*)
- Yes
 - No
 - Refuse to answer

- Q4.** Do you consider yourself to be a person that actively practices religion?
- Yes
 - No
 - Refuse to answer

- Q5.** How often do you attend holy places? (*Hint: like mosques, churches, shrines, etc.*)
- More than once a week
 - Once a week
 - Once a month
 - Only at specific holy days
 - Seldom
 - Never
 - Refuse to answer

- Q6.** Do you listen to preachers in your everyday life? (*Hint: in holy places like mosques, churches, etc.*)
- Yes, in the holy places I attend
 - Yes, online through social media or other means
 - No
 - Refuse to answer



- Q7.** About how often would you say that you pray?
- a. Every day
 - b. More than once a week
 - c. Once a week
 - d. At least once a month
 - e. A few times a year
 - f. Seldom
 - g. Never
 - h. Refuse

section iii: perceptions

- Q1.** What is the biggest problem Albania faces today that personally concerns you the most?
- a. Inequality between rich and poor
 - b. Declining moral values in our society
 - c. Youth unemployment
 - d. Corruption
 - e. Crime
 - f. Conflict between religious groups
 - g. Violence against women
 - h. Other _____
- Q2.** What is the most important channel that you use to get information about what happens in the world?
- a. News broadcasts on TV or radio
 - b. Newspapers
 - c. Social networks
 - d. Online news portals
 - e. Other people (e.g.: relatives, friends, acquaintances)
 - f. Other _____
- Q3.** What source of information is the most credible to you? (*Hint: It deserves to be trusted*)
- a. Mainstream media
 - b. Certain/particular portals
 - c. Official information from Government bodies
 - d. Certain reputable/authoritative people
 - e. Friends/acquaintances
 - f. Other _____
- Q4.** How informed would you say that you are about your religion?
- a. Not at all informed
 - b. Not very informed
 - c. Somewhat informed
 - d. Completely informed

Q5. From what sources do you get religious information about God and religion? (*Hint: How do you get informed?*)

- a. I do not get any information on this topic
- b. From the mosque/church etc. that I attend
- c. From exchanges with local religious scholars/leaders
- d. From the internet and social media
- e. From the books
- f. Other _____

Q6. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Statements a-i	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ No opinion
6a. My religion is the main source of moral guidance in my life.	1	2	3	4	99
6b. There is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of my religion.	1	2	3	4	99
6c. I have my own way of connecting with God without religious services.	1	2	3	4	99
6d. Many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven.	1	2	3	4	99
6e. I share my faith or views on God with others.	1	2	3	4	99
6f. It is better for us if our society consists of people from different nationalities, religions, and cultures.	1	2	3	4	99
	1	2	3	4	99
6h. People with very strong religious beliefs are often intolerant of others.	1	2	3	4	99
6i. I would accept a person from a different religion marrying a close relative of mine.	1	2	3	4	99
6j. Even if a law that conflicts my religious principles and teachings passes, I would follow the law.	1	2	3	4	99

Q7. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Statements a-f	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ No opinion
7a. It is the government's sole responsibility to take care of the very poor people of the society who can't take care of themselves.	1	2	3	4	99
7b. Democracy is better than any other kind of government.	1	2	3	4	99
7c. Governments should not interfere with the efforts of any religion to spread their faith.	1	2	3	4	99
7d. A country's laws should not be based on any religion.	1	2	3	4	99
7e. Government policies should support the spread of religious values and beliefs in our country.	1	2	3	4	99
7f. Religions bring more peace than conflict.	1	2	3	4	99

Q8. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Statements a-e	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ No opinion
8a. Religious institutions in Albania bring people together and strengthen social bonds.	1	2	3	4	99
8b. Religious institutions in Albania focus too much on money and power.	1	2	3	4	99
8c. Religious institutions in Albania focus too much on rules.	1	2	3	4	99
8d. The clerics in the area I live have too much power.	1	2	3	4	99
8e. The clerics in the area I live focus too much on rules.	1	2	3	4	99



section iv: perceptions focused on gender inequality and discrimination

Q1. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Statements a-f	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know/ No opinion
1a. In the Albanian society, there is equality between men and women.	1	2	3	4	99
1b. Religions are usually a barrier to equality between women and men.	1	2	3	4	99
1c. Religions treat men and women equally.	1	2	3	4	99
1d. A husband's primary job is to earn money.	1	2	3	4	99
1e. Domestic violence against women is acceptable under certain limited circumstances.	1	2	3	4	99
1f. When jobs are limited, men should have more rights to a job than women.	1	2	3	4	99

section iv: perceptions focused on violent extremism

Q1. To what extent are there problems with violent extremism (any form of it) in your local community?

- a. There are no problems
- b. There are a few problems
- c. There are some problems at a certain point
- d. There are a lot of problems
- e. I don't know/ No opinion

Q2. Please, answer the following questions.

Questions a-h	Yes	No	I don't know	Refuse
2a. Is there any group in your local community that tends to have violent extremism features?	1	2	3	99
2b. are there people in your local community who tend to reveal violent extremism features?	1	2	3	99
2c. Do you believe that the number of individuals and/or radical groups in Albania is increasing?	1	2	3	99
2d. Do you know any source in your local community that solicits people to become radicals?	1	2	3	99
2e. Do you know if there were people from your local community who went to foreign battlefields (Iraq, Syria)?	1	2	3	99
/IF YOU CHOOSE "no" SWITCH TO THE OTHER QUESTION 2G				
2f. Do you know if there were women from your local community who went to foreign battlefields (Iraq, Syria)?	1	2	3	99
2g. Do you know anybody who has been to foreign battlefields and has turned back in your local community?	1	2	3	99
/IF YOU CHOOSE "no" SWITCH TO THE OTHER QUESTION P5				
2h. Do you know if any woman who has been to foreign battlefields has turned back in your local community?	1	2	3	99

Q3. Did you have contacts with a person (who has turned back from Siria, Iraq, etc.)?

- a. Yes, too many times
- b. Yes, once a week
- c. Yes, once
- d. Refuse to answer



Q4. Please, answer the following questions.

Questions a-c	Yes	No	I don` t know	Refuse
4a. Are returnees from war (Syria, Iraq, etc.) welcomed in your community?	1	2	3	99
4b. Are returnees from foreign battlefields a threat to the safety of your community?	1	2	3	99
4c. Are returnees from foreign battlefields a threat to security in Albania?	1	2	3	99

Q5. What do you think are the three main reasons why people leave Albania to fight in foreign countries? (*You can choose up to three answers*)

- a. Poverty and low economy
- b. Religious / ideological beliefs
- c. Mental health problems
- d. Adventure
- e. Personal/family problems
- f. Financial benefits
- g. To follow friends and family members
- h. Other _____
- i. I don` t know/Refuse to answer

Q6. What do you think are the three main reasons why women left Albania to fight in foreign countries? (*You can choose up to three responses*)

- a. Poverty and low economy
- b. Religious / ideological beliefs
- c. Mental health problems
- d. Adventure
- e. Personal/family problems
- f. Financial benefits
- g. To follow the husband
- h. Other _____
- i. I don` t know/Refuse to answer

Q7. What would you do if somebody you know (*ex. A friend, a relative or family member*) is interested in fighting in foreign countries?

- a. I would try to convince him/her that it is not the right thing to do
- b. I would support him/her
- c. I would report to the police
- d. I would inform the religious authority regarding that
- e. I would speak with his/her family
- f. I would not intervene
- g. Other _____
- h. I don` t know/Refuse to answer



- Q8.** What are the three main institutions that should be responsible for the reintegration of returnees from foreign countries (Like Syria, Iraq) in Albanian society? (*You can choose up to three responses*)
- Local authority
 - Local Police
 - Central authority
 - Local Organizations
 - International Organizations
 - Institutions of Religious Communities
 - Other _____
 - I don't know/Refuse to answer
- Q9.** Would you support the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees from war countries (such as Syria and Iraq) into Albanian society?
- Yes
 - No
 - I don't know
 - Refuse to answer
- Q10.** Do you believe that the reintegration of returnees from war countries (such as Syria and Iraq) is possible?
- Yes
 - No
 - I don't know
 - Refuse to answer
- Q11.** Do you think that in Albania it is necessary to implement programs to prevent extremism, radicalism, and terrorism?
- Yes
 - No
 - I don't know
 - Refuse to answer
- Q12.** Would you participate in these programs and help in their implementation?
- Yes
 - No
 - I don't know
 - Refuse to answer



ANNEX II

Questionnaire for women returnees

Topic 1: Past life

Question 1.1. Please talk briefly about your past and your present. What is your educational background? (Probes: What school have you completed? Have you attended specific courses or training sessions? Do you speak any foreign languages?)

Topic 2: Present life

Question 2.1. Please describe your family. (Probes: Your current marital status. If married, how long have you been married? When and how did you meet your current/former partner? What is his employment status? Do you have any children?)

Question 2.2. What are the biggest challenges you have faced/face as a family? What about your relationship with your family?

Question 2.3. Are you currently employed? If yes, where are you employed? If not, why? What would you like to do?

Question 2.4. Please describe the community you live in. How would you describe the relationship you have with the community you live in? (Probes: Do you, and how do you contribute to your local community? Do you help one another if someone needs help? Do you feel you belong to the local community?)

Topic 3: Religion

Question 3.1. When did you begin to practice Islam actively? (Probes: How did you learn about Islam? Did/Do your parents practice Islam? In what ways was their practice/is different? What about your husband?)

Question 3.2. How informed are you about your religion? From what sources do you get religious information? (Probes: Do you attend the local mosque? Do you use the internet and social media as a source of information?)

Question 3.3. What do you think is the general opinion about your practice of Islam in the local community in which you live? Does their opinion on your way of practicing Islam affect your sense of belonging to the local community?

Question 3.4. What do you think of the Islamic Community in Albania?

Topic 4: Discrimination and redress mechanisms

Question 4.1. To what extent are you able to freely practice your religion in Albania? If not, why and how?

Question 4.2. Think back if you have ever been/felt discriminated against because of your beliefs. In what ways did it happen? Was it discrimination by family, peers, institutions, or others?

Question 4.3. What kind of other discrimination have you experienced? Gender, ethnicity, other? If yes, in what ways did you handle the situation? Did you report it? If yes, where and how did the referred institution react? If no, why didn't you report it?



- Question 4.4. To what extent do you believe that governmental institutions can protect you if you face similar situations?
- Question 4.5. If you had any concerns regarding your security or if you felt under pressure, what would you do?
- Question 4.6. Are you aware of any mechanisms provided by the law which can support or protect you?
- Question 4.7. To what extent do you think you are informed on your rights as guaranteed by the law in Albania?
- Question 4.8. Have you ever faced family violence before? If yes, have you reported the case somewhere?

Topic 5: Pathways and experience

- Question 5.1. Do you remember when you first heard about the conflict in Syria and Iraq?
- Question 5.2. How were you informed about the circumstances in Syria/Iraq? (Probes: Maybe husband, friends/relatives, family members, news)
- Question 5.3. Did you have any information, or did you know these places before traveling there?
- Question 5.4. How did you first get inspired to travel to Syria/Iraq?
- Question 5.5. What are some of the reasons that made you travel there?
- Question 5.6. Who was the most influential person affecting the decision?
- Question 5.7. What was the reaction of your family and friends after you communicated to them the decision to leave the country? Were they supportive?
- Question 5.8. Would you like to explain your travel experience briefly? When did you travel, and what route did you take? How long did the travel take? Did you know where you were going? What did you expect? Were you instructed on how to behave, what you would do, and where you would be staying?
- Question 5.9. Who helped you with the logistics? Did you travel alone or with another family member? Did you know who would welcome you? Who waited for you there? How expensive was it to travel there?
- Question 5.10. How would you describe your stay there?
- Question 5.11. What have you seen while living there?
- Question 5.12. How much time did you stay there? Did you change living places?
- Question 5.13. During your stay there, did you have contact with the family members in Albania?
- Question 5.14. How do you describe your role there? Can you describe how you spent the days there?
- Question 5.15. Were you in contact with other women living there also? Did you meet anyone else from Albania?
- Question 5.16. Did any of your friends and/or family members go to Syria and Iraq as well? Do you know if other persons in your local area are planning to go there?



Topic 6: Return and re-integration

- Question 6.1. What were the reasons that made you return to Albania?
- Question 6.2. Who was the most decisive person or specific factor/situation affecting the decision? (Probes: Family/bad experiences/financial challenges/not what they expected/etc.)
- Question 6.3. Who helped you with the logistics? Did you face any difficulties?
- Question 6.4. How was your return back to Albania? To what extent were you welcomed following your return? (Probes: Did you use the same route to return to Albania?)
- Question 6.5. Who did you contact after you returned to Albania?
- Question 6.6. Have you ever felt that the community, family, or neighborhood did not accept you after your return? In what ways?
- Question 6.7. Did you get any support from the state or other governmental institutions? Have they contacted you? (e.g., police, municipality, civil society organizations, etc. Do you feel surveilled by the police?)
- Question 6.8. Did the religious community support you? If so, in what ways? If not, do you think they should have?
- Question 6.9. How is your current life now, and what are you missing? Do you regret going to Syria/Iraq?
- Question 6.10. Have you been part of any initiative or re-integration program after your return? (Meaning of re-integration programs to be explained in plain terms)



List of interviewees:

- Bajrami, A. *Journalist A2CNN* (16 December 2019).
- Bardhi, V. *Representative of the Woman Department, Pogradec Chiefdom* (01 November 2019).
- Bozo, A. *Executive Director of Center for Legal Civic Initiatives* (26 December 2019).
- Brucaj, S. *Representative of the Albanian Muslim Community* (3 February 2020).
- Cela, A. *Executive Director and Head of the European Program at the Albanian Institute for International Studies* (26 December 2019).
- Gajda, R. *Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination* (3 December 2019).
- Gjinishi, E. *Researcher, theologian, Muslim Community* (6 June 2020).
- Gjoni, I. *Representative of the Protestant community, Elbasan* (10 February 2020).
- Gjura, V. *Representative of the Woman Department, Elbasan Chiefdom* (4 February 2020).
- Hide, E. *Lecturer, expert and researcher* (16 December 2019).
- Kasapi, J. *Journalist A2CNN* (4 May 2020).
- Kopliku, T. *Journalist Canale 5* (6 May 2020).
- Kuko, R. *Vice Minister of interior affairs* (21 January 2020).
- Ramkaj, A. *Chairman of IRCC* (7 November 2019).
- Vurmo, G. *Programme Director, IDM* (9 December 2019).



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Examining Gendered Components of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Albania

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