PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Deradicalisation and Disengagement of Women Convicted of Terrorism Offences in Spain

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Volume XVIII, Issue 3
September 2024

ISSN: 2334-3745
DOI: 10.19165/2024.1801

Abstract: Understanding what motivates a woman to deradicalise or disengage from a terrorist organisation remains among the less explored academic topics today. This study explores the reasons why thirteen women in Spain either began their process of disengagement from IS, and/or initiated a change in their belief system. The research is based on personal interviews with inmates linked to the Islamic State, as well as with prison officials, psychologists, and educators. The article shows that the decision to stop deviant behaviour, or the experience of a cognitive rejection of beliefs, was preceded by disenchantment, the acquisition of new goals, or the feeling of being accepted by and/or integrated into new social networks.

Keywords: Deradicalisation, disengagement, women, IS, terrorism

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Introduction

Understanding how the deradicalisation process works and how an individual disengages from a terrorist organisation, remain two main areas of academic attention today. Attempts to get individuals to end criminal behaviour or to stop supporting a specific ideology can be traced back decades.[1] However, post-9/11 War on Terror rhetoric and the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) sparked an academic interest in understanding how these dynamics work.[2] Despite this increasing scholarly focus on disengagement and deradicalisation, there are only limited empirical results in this field.[3] Further, a vast amount of research in the field of terrorism studies suffers from the same lack of empirical results, largely due to the difficulty of accessing solid and representative sources.[4]

This lack of evaluative studies on deradicalisation and disengagement is more pronounced regarding women.[5] Despite the substantial body of literature focused on females and terrorism,[6] which increased significantly after the self-proclaimed 'caliphate' in June 2014,[7] the study of countering violent extremism (CVE) for women and strategies related to deradicalisation or disengagement are still insufficient.[8] This is a challenge that should be addressed, considering the significant number of women returnees, and states and communities must develop strategies to rehabilitate and reintegrate them back into society.[9]

This research examines the particular experience of thirteen women who were convicted of terrorism offences in Spain. The study delves into the reasons these females have either begun their process of disengagement from IS, and/or initiated a change in their belief system despite not following a deradicalisation programme. Both processes are explored in the study with the intention of avoiding any guiding of the testimonies of the participants towards one process in particular. The analysis identifies measures that were effective in the case of these women, so these results should not be deemed as representative bearing in mind the limited number of the sample.

Due to the lack of literature and information available on this phenomenon, this contribution is considered relevant for both academia and counter-terrorism policymakers as it draws upon original data and empirical evidence. This article complements existing research on women's disengagement and deradicalisation processes, while also exploring the relationship between these two phenomena. Additionally, it offers insights into how these dynamics can occur outside of formal deradicalisation programmes.

The article starts by defining disengagement and deradicalisation processes, followed by a discussion of the analytical framing of these practices regarding women. Next, it describes the research methodology and the contextualisation of women prosecuted for jihadism in Spain. Finally, the study discusses and analyses the factors that led these women to abandon the ideology of IS and/or to stop their felony offences as narrated by the participants. The research also relies on other primary sources, such as the testimony of prison officials, psychologists, and educators, to confront different points of view.

Terminology and Definition of the Processes of Disengagement and Deradicalisation

The concepts of disengagement and deradicalisation are complex and face a significant challenge: the lack of precision in their use.[10] In academia, these terms have been defined in varied and often imprecise ways. This has resulted in political and practical actions lacking clear theoretical frameworks.[11] This study focuses on assessing whether the women interviewed

have undergone a process of disengagement and/or deradicalisation. To do so, it is crucial to first examine how the existing literature defines and evaluates these terms.

While deradicalisation and disengagement concepts involve a process of moving away from violent extremism, they refer to different aspects of this transformation. There is a difference between experiencing a cognitive rejection of beliefs (deradicalisation) and simply ending criminal behaviour but remaining committed to the ideology that motivates violence (disengagement).[12] It must be taken into account that an extremist belief system is usually deeply rooted in an individual. It can be difficult to deconstruct due to the emotional involvement that may exist or the defence mechanisms that have been developed to justify their actions.[13] There are several definitions of these two concepts; for instance, Horgan and Braddock define deradicalisation as:

> *the social and psychological process whereby an individual's commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity.*[14]

Disengagement is defined as:

> *the process whereby an individual experiences a change in role or function that is usually associated with a reduction of violent participation. It may not necessarily involve leaving the movement but is most frequently associated with significant temporary or permanent role change.*[15]

It is more accessible, and even reachable, to appeal to the concept of disengagement, which refers to a break with the criminal and terrorist actions of a particular group, without necessarily implying the renunciation of convictions upon which an individual has built a criminal record.[16] Moreover, disengagement often marks the initial phase of deradicalisation, during which individuals become more receptive to considering new perspectives and values that differ from their previous beliefs.[17]

Assessing whether an individual has disengaged or deradicalised is also a hard task.[18] Comparative studies of successful strategies have rarely been conducted and information on deradicalisation programmes is seldom shared.[19] Behavioural indicators (e.g., avoiding recidivism) can suggest disengagement, while deradicalisation is often assessed through interviews,[20] psychological evaluations or self-report surveys.[21] However, the reliability of these assessments is often debated, as they can be influenced by external factors, such as the participant's desire for social acceptance.

Literature Review: Women Disengagement and Deradicalisation Practices

Women have been involved in terrorism for centuries.[22] The Russian group The People's Will (*Narodnaya Volya*), the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (in Sri Lanka) and Peru's Shining Path all had female members.[23] Women have also held leadership roles in organisations such as the Red Army Faction (Germany), the Red Brigades (Italy) and the Weather Underground (United States).[24] A remarkable number of publications deal with the question of how to explain why women become involved in political violence.[25] That interest in research on women and terrorism increased after an unprecedented number of women joined IS. According to Cook and Vale, around 6,902 foreign women worldwide travelled to join the group in Syria and Iraq.[26]

The representation of women in political violence has been characterised by strong gender bias.[27] For centuries, women have been identified as victims, as beings with behavioural disorders, or as a sort of femme fatale.[28] The tendency to portray women as easily manipulated victims with no agency has hindered the development of an effective policy against female violent extremism,[29] where women are made invisible,[30] or are undervalued in counterterror and PCVE work. For instance, many European countries did not initially prosecute women returning from IS, and they are less likely to be charged with terrorism offences.[31] However, that is slowly changing, as courts in Belgium, Germany, France, and the Netherlands are convicting the majority of female returnees for membership of a terrorist organisation. There are judicial challenges in applying further charges, which are related partly to the difficulty of gathering sufficient evidence.[32] Furthermore, in contrast to their male counterparts, women are generally considered less dangerous by the general public.[33]

Nevertheless, women have proved capable of carrying out terrorist attacks in the name of jihad in the West,[34] and reports highlight the violent attitudes of some females who still remain in Kurdish camps awaiting their repatriation.[35] Government transparency regarding the total number of female returnees is limited. Still, sources indicate that approximately 609 women have been repatriated worldwide—including 240 from various European countries—since the fall of the self-proclaimed 'caliphate'.[36] This summary should be sufficient to eradicate gender stereotypes in interventions to counter violent extremism (CVE). Specifically, addressing women's own needs in the design of strategies for disengagement and deradicalisation is seen by some scholars as indispensable.[37] This necessity was emphasised in several studies focusing on the demobilisation of women from armed groups in Guatemala, Sierra Leone and Ethiopia.[38]

Studies on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of women highlight the need to investigate the reasons that led women to join these guerrilla movements and how they were treated once in them. This understanding is crucial for providing women with proper treatment in subsequent programming.[39] Female ex-fighters have found that access to education, development of new skills, and the broadening of networks of women as indispensable factors in their demobilisation.[40] On the other hand, women have had trouble dealing with the loss of meaning and purpose once they leave the insurgency. The return to traditional gender relations was also identified as a challenging factor to deal with once they abandoned the fight.[41]

Some of these lessons can be incorporated into disengagement and deradicalisation practices concerning women in the West, as the literature on this topic is still in its infancy, with few but noteworthy studies to date.[42] The scholar Muhanna-Matar conducted a study on the experiences of 28 individuals from Tunisia (18 men and 10 women) in rejecting Salafist/jihadist ideology. It reveals that "interpersonal experiences among female Salafis appeared to be the main motives for their deradicalisation."[43] Some of these extreme experiences or 'trigger events' that led them to initiate a cognitive rejection included experiencing a lack of support from supposed Salafi fellows during difficult times, and being beaten by an abusive Jihadi husband. For its part, Gielen's survey offers a proposal on how to carry out a realistic assessment to evaluate exit programmes for female jihadists and argues that:

> *Exit requires a holistic and long-term approach that takes into account push and pull factors, combining multiple interventions that activate different mechanisms such as family support, physical and psychological assessment and counselling, and theological and ideological guidance.*[44]

This approach aligns with the main contributions that seek to identify the reasons leading individuals to abandon violent extremism.[45] Kruglanski considers that deradicalisation

constitutes a decrease in the commitment of individuals to their convictions and this involves the acquisition of new goals and interests.[46] Participation in artistic activities with which individuals could express themselves, as well as the development of new skills, were found essential in the case of former members of LTTE.[47]

According to the UNDP report 'Invisible Women', extremist offenders in Lebanon also showed good responses after undergoing psychosocial therapy. The document pointed out the positive initiative implemented by the non-profit organisation 'Rescue Me'. The association treated 61 men and nine women who had been members of violent extremist groups, including IS. The treatment consisted of offering psychosocial support, art therapy, and aggression replacement therapy (ART) to rehabilitate radicalised inmates. The participants displayed a great attitude and disposition to work from this approach, which was applied after building bonds of trust between practitioners and inmates.[48]

Today, more strategies are being tailored to individuals' needs and circumstances. Regarding this matter, prison programmes in countries such as Belgium, France and Germany are tailored to the needs of female violent extremists and cover different psychological aspects.[49] Moreover, the focus of these strategies lies on achieving a behavioural change rather than provoking a cognitive rejection of beliefs in the beneficiaries.[50] A recent analysis of autobiographical data from over 80 members of diverse terrorist groups—including religious organisations and extreme left-wing groups—suggests that abandoning violent ways has little to do with a change in ideological beliefs, and instead, disengagement is the result of factors linked to emotional exhaustion. Disillusionment, disagreements, or dissatisfaction with the group or their members are all identified as signs of abandoning the organisation.[51] Disenchantment with unfulfilled expectations is also found in exploratory research examining the motives underlying radicalisation and disengagement of female jihadists incarcerated in Spanish prisons from a psychological perspective.[52]

More recently, Perešin, Hasanović and Bytyqi revealed that female returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans expressed sentiments of disillusion and a decrease in their commitment to the group. Female returnees in France have shown the same feeling of disappointment based on their life in the caliphate, a situation that is not shared by most of the women incarcerated who did not travel to Syria.[53] Perešin, Hasanovic, and Bytyqi also remarked that the most pressing challenge for these repatriated females is "how to rebuild their lives, resocialise into their communities, gain economic independence, and secure a future for themselves and their children."[54]

The Prosecution of Jihadist Women in Spain

Spain has faced major jihadist attacks throughout its history, such as the 1985 explosion at the El Descanso restaurant, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, and more recently, the 2017 Barcelona and Cambrils vehicle-ramming attacks. Despite these terrible episodes, the number of foreign fighters who joined IS—in relation to the size of the national Muslim population—has not been as high in Spain as in other European countries.[55] The majority of the Islamic community in Spain comes from Morocco, which began to have a small presence in the country in the 1960s due to the economic boom. In 2021, Muslims represented 4.2 percent of the total population.[56]

Until the emergence of IS, no woman had been convicted in Spain for crimes related to jihadist terrorism.[57] In August 2014, two young women aged fourteen and nineteen were arrested when they tried to cross the border of Melilla, with the intention of joining the organisation in Syria or Iraq.[58] This episode led to the dismantling of a network involved in sending women to the territory under IS control. Six women (two of them minors) who were part of this network were

later convicted of terrorism offences. Since then, at least twenty females have been sentenced for participating in activities linked to the group in the country and nine remained in prison as of February 2024.[59]

The average age of the 23 women arrested between 2014 and 2016 was 24 years old, but in early 2022 a 72-year-old woman was charged with recruiting activities, becoming the oldest woman to be detained for this type of crime in Spain. Around 60 percent of the detained women had Spanish nationality and most were descendants of people born in Morocco, whereas the remaining 40 percent held Moroccan nationality.[60] A large proportion of those women resided in what are considered to be important hotspots of jihadism in the country: the cities of Ceuta, Melilla, and Barcelona province.[61] Notably, the number of female jihadist offenders increased in 2022 and 2023 after no arrests were made in 2021. This data highlights the changing role of women in jihadist activities in Spain, particularly after the 2019 arrest of a woman for showing intentions of preparing a terrorist attack in the country.[62]

Although Spain is one of the European states that has experienced the least female mobilisation,[63] around 30 women joined the group in Syria and Iraq. Four of them were located in camps guarded by the Kurdish authorities in 2019. Three years later, in November 2022, the Spanish government began repatriation procedures for these women. Two of these women returned to Spain with thirteen children in their care in January 2023; the rest have been unreachable by the Spanish security forces. Today, these women remain in custody awaiting trial for their possible crimes linked to IS.[64]

Methodology

Sample

This research examines the experiences of thirteen women who were convicted of terrorism offences in Spain between 2017 and 2020. To build the sample the author conducted in-depth interviews with twelve females sentenced in Spain for terrorism offences, while the experience of the thirteenth woman was shared by the psychologist who treated her. In addition, to confront different points of view, the research relies on the testimony of prison officials, psychologists, and educators who have treated some of the women sampled. Taking into account other primary sources—beyond the narratives of women in the sample—allowed for comparisons between the narratives of the women and those familiar with their cases, which can help avoid a biased version of the women's experiences. It is important to highlight that none of the participants followed a specific deradicalisation programme in jail, as no such initiative is currently available. The intervention of these professionals is only part of the standard treatment provided to the entire prison population, aimed at inmate rehabilitation.

The study was proposed to the Secretary of the Penitentiary Administration by submitting a standard application for conducting research in Spanish prisons. The form included a confirmation letter expressing the full support of my college board, the Instituto Universitario Gutiérrez Mellado (IUGM-UNED), as well as a detailed description of the chosen methodology to carry out the study. Once the penitentiary administration approved it, the author contacted the wardens of the four prisons that hold female inmates convicted of terrorist offences to finalise details for visits and to determine the sample of potential participants. The initial contact with inmates and prison officials was made through wardens and deputy directors of treatments, as they are part of the daily life of the convicts and have close contact with them. This interaction was used to explain the ongoing project and inquire about the women's willingness to participate, emphasising that their involvement was voluntary.

Subsequently, an appointment was scheduled between the author and the participants who had expressed interest in taking part in the study. The first step of these encounters served to provide detailed information about the project, resolve enquiries, and provide information to them about the academic scope of the research. At this point, one woman opted not to be part of the study after the information meeting, as she was reluctant to disclose intimate and distressing experiences with someone lacking her trust. The rest of the women approached agreed to participate, on the condition that they would not be recorded or identified with their names in order to avoid stigmatisation. Interestingly, most of the women who participated in the study asserted that they experienced relief after having the opportunity to express their feelings and stories, as their perception was that the press depicted them negatively and their voices had been usually forgotten.

Informed consent was individually obtained from all participants, and conversations were conducted in Spanish, as the individuals in the sample were all proficient in this language. Consequently, the statements were translated into English by the author during the writing process of this article. All interview data was anonymised following the policy of Data Protection of UNED in accordance with the European Legislation to protect the women's identities as well as that of the prison officials. The period of the field research was between September 2018 and January 2023.

The sample age group ranged from 22 to 48 years old, with an average of 26.5 years age. Six were born in Spain, six in Morocco, and one was from a Latin American country.[65] All of them had been living in Spain since their early childhood. Ten of the women in the sample resided in the main hotspots of jihadist activity in Spain. In terms of religion, ten came from a Muslim family and three converted to Islam at some point in their adolescent life. None had a criminal record prior to their terrorism conviction. The main crime for which these women were convicted was joining a terrorist organisation. They were also charged with other felonies, including collaborating with a terrorist organisation, and self- indoctrination crime.[66] None of the women in the sample committed violent crimes.

During their imprisonment, these women were in a closed regime department. Article 10.1 of the Penitentiary Regulations in Spain establishes that the criteria for classifying inmates in this type of regime are based on their perceived level of danger or unsuitability for ordinary and open regimes. Those convicted of terrorism offences, regardless of their behaviour or the nature of the crime, are usually included in this category, where there is greater security and isolation.[67] This means that young women incarcerated for a minor crime, for instance, self-indoctrination, share space with dangerous inmates charged with murder. At the time of their interview, each woman had been in prison between six months and three years.

Research Method

The research methodology is mainly qualitative in order to study the personal experiences and narratives of the participants. The method of narrative analysis is useful to explore how individuals construct a story from their personal experience.[68] In this sense, the analysis was carried out through open and separate interviews with both the inmates and the prison officials themselves. In the case of the inmates, they were asked about their experiences upon detention, including their feelings, emotional states at the time of arrest, how they coped with various events, and their stance on IS doctrine. These interviews were unstructured in order to obtain a flow of information and not to direct their answer. The ultimate aim was to identify whether

the women sampled have begun a process of disengagement from IS, and/or have initiated a change in their belief system, and to generate new insights about the factors influencing these dynamics.

Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, ethical implications were considered in the design of the research. Most of the sessions were held in prison, but the author managed to have conversations with three of the inmates in public spaces following their release. These encounters took place in cafeterias in Ceuta and Madrid.[69] The period of each encounter lasted from sixty minutes to two hours, and they were always conducted alone, without the presence or the supervision of any authority, so participants felt free and comfortable to express both feelings and experiences.

In the study names are replaced by the letter X followed by an identification number. Through the analysis of the data collection, I was able to detect some measures that have been effective in the cessation of their crime activities, and in the process of doing so, at least some of them experienced a cognitive rejection of their radical beliefs.

Findings

After completing the interviews, which were conducted using the methodology described above rather than a structured clinical assessment, the analysis of transcripts focused on the sequence of events the women described as well as their feelings, confessions and reactions, in order to identify patterns and insights into their experiences and transformations. Patterns revealed by this analysis were also cross-checked with the testimonies of prison officials, psychologists, and educators, who provided additional perspectives and a more comprehensive profile of these women, helping to categorise the participants as being in a process of disengagement, deradicalisation, or another state. Table 1 indicates the assessed state of the participants at the time of their interview.

Table 1: State of the Women Sampled

Deradicalisation	X2; X3; X4; X8; X10; X11; X13
Disengagement	X5; X6; X7; X9; X12
Maintained support for IS doctrine	X1

The analysis of the narratives provided by the participants indicated that seven of the women experienced a deradicalisation process. This term is understood here as the procedure of distancing oneself from extremist views, which is measured in ending their support for IS doctrine. This change happened naturally as a result of life events and in response to a variety of external conditions. Triggering factors for this change included experiencing disenchantment with an idealised life that turned out to be false. Additionally, the feeling of being accepted by and/or integrated into new social networks played a significant role. For instance, one woman (Case X1) pointed out that she still harboured extremist thoughts because her process of radicalisation came from some of her relatives with whom she still maintains contact. Indeed, as other researchers have highlighted, family ties often play a key role in explaining the shift towards radicalisation,[70,71] and also have a significant influence in facilitating the opposite outcome, contributing to a process of deradicalisation.[72]

Table 2: Factors that Motivated Deradicalisation

Disenchantment	X8; X13
Feeling of being accepted by/ and/or integrated into new social networks	X2; X3; X4; X10; X11

On the other hand, five women sampled did not appear to have extremist views when they committed crimes related to jihadist offences; instead, other circumstances had led them to engage in these crimes. These findings support the argument made by the researcher John Horgan, who warned that not all individuals who are radical become terrorists, nor do all terrorists hold radical views.[73] Horgan argues that there is a tendency to assume a causal connection between the holding of radical views and engaging in terrorist actions, which can lead to errors when devising intervention strategies for inmates. Appropriate measures to counteract these challenges should, therefore, address the reasons that led an individual to commit these crimes in order to rehabilitate them. In such circumstances, the use of the term deradicalisation (and all that it entails) could achieve the opposite effect. For instance, five women in this sample ceased their criminal activity mainly after replacing their deviant social world and establishing ties with new social networks, which provided them with gratification and a different social identity unique from the one they developed with the terrorist group. The acquisition of new goals and priorities was a key factor in the disengagement process of Cases X8 and X13, contributing toward their deradicalisation.

Table 3: Factors that Motivated Disengagement

Replacing their deviant social world with a new social network	X5; X6; X7; X9; X12
Acquisition of new goals	X8; X13

The decision to cease deviant behaviour or undergo a cognitive rejection of beliefs is often preceded by a variety of factors and a combination of several of them, making it difficult to prioritise one over another. In this case, the identification was through what the participants remarked as the most prominent factor, but it is important to recognise that this does not negate the influence of other contributing elements. Disengagement and deradicalisation are complex processes that are usually interconnected, which is why a holistic approach has been adopted. This approach is used to discuss in detail the set of factors and experiences encountered by the participants in the following section.

Discussion

New Motivations and Priorities

Studies have identified the acquisition of new motivations and priorities as one of the factors leading to the deradicalisation process or disengagement of individuals.[74] This factor was reflected by two of the women in the sample. For instance, Cases X8 and X13 noted that starting a family and becoming a mother were significant experiences that challenged them. "I found out I was pregnant shortly after I was taken into custody. Now I just want to leave all that behind and dedicate myself to my family" (Case X13). Another one of the interviewees remarked that her change of attitude arose because of her husband:

> *When I got married, my husband gave me an ultimatum: You either stop your contact with groups online (referring to the chats she had with women arrested for links with IS) or we will break up. I always wanted to have a family, so I stopped these interactions. Then I got pregnant, a much-wanted baby, and now I just want to be with my daughter* (Case X8).[75]

These women identified a change in their personal priorities as the 'trigger event' that caused them to abandon their contacts with extremist environments. Once they severed these ties and acquired another identity outside the organisation through motherhood, it generated feelings of disenchantment with the life they had before their arrest. This led them to question their previous beliefs and ultimately resulted in a loss of support for the IS doctrine. Two of these women had grown up in conservative Muslim communities where traditional gender roles are deep-rooted.[76] These dynamics influenced the way they perceived or defined themselves in their communities. Motherhood and family provided them with a new purpose and social recognition, as these roles are deeply embedded and highly valued in their network.

Men have also alluded to personal reasons for disengaging from an extremist group. For instance, former members of the Spanish separatist organisation ETA remarked that becoming a parent and starting a new relationship was crucial to disengaging from the organisation.[77] This argument reinforces the idea that men are also influenced by emotional or personal factors, and the change of priorities just may come for both women and men naturally as a result of maturity or a change in life circumstances.[78] It is worth noting that a majority of the women sampled were particularly young at the time of being arrested. At that stage, teenagers tend to go through a period of self-definition within society,[79] and they do not have the necessary mental and intellectual abilities to navigate both extremist points of view and the dynamics of public opinion.[80] Case X8 and Case X13 also mentioned that they no longer recognise themselves from that time or understand how they came to support IS's ideology. For instance, one of the women confessed during the interview that she was foolish and vulnerable at that moment in her life, and she regretted everything that she had done (Case X13).

Education has also been identified as a contributing factor when reducing interest in violent extremism as well as in a DDR process.[81] Through education, individuals can experience new concerns in life and develop proper skills to enter the labour market, and in doing so establish new ties with their community. However, education does not appeal to everyone—for example, women jailed for terrorist activities in Kenya have reported a lack of interest in the prison-based education and job training programmes available.[82] There may also be a lack of adequate programmes that take women's needs or interests into account. In the case of the women sampled, some of the officials explained that studying was a 'key factor' in the change of belief system of the young women. Furthermore, they also became involved willingly in education and showed interest in learning while in prison.

Seven women (Cases: X2, X4, X5, X7, X8, X10, X11), all under thirty years old, reported during the interviews that they resumed their studies while in prison. Four of them have obtained—or were in the process of obtaining—their school-leaving certificate, and others are taking the university entrance course. Teaching, social work and pedagogy are among the degrees they are considering studying and the jobs they would like to pursue once they are released from prison. One woman has begun her studies in Hispanic philology after her release. According to a pioneering study on the criminal desistence of female street offenders, "education and occupational roles reaffirm noncriminal identities and bond themselves to conventional lifestyles,"[83] so it is unsurprising that the majority of the women in this study found—through education and a new occupation—a way to feel valid in society. Only one of the women

sampled "did not show any interest in culture or education" (Case X9), which, according to the psychologist who treated her (and per the woman's own admission), was due to a lack of confidence in her own intellectual abilities.

Positive Reinforcement and Individualised Treatment

Psychological assessment and individualised treatment have been proven indispensable in changing the attitudes and cognitive views of some of the women in the sample. During one of the interviews, an educator and a psychologist from a penitentiary emphasised the significance of this approach. They provided an example, citing the response of one of the women (Case X11) who had entered prison with highly extremist Islamic ideological beliefs:

> *When she entered prison, she was very young (nineteen years old) and had a very impulsive temperament. She needed to interact with people and the isolation was killing her, so we started to induce her to change her attitude and to do the things she liked, such as sports. When she felt that she was supported and that not everyone had bad intentions, she started to change her attitude and to trust us, although she had a hard time and cried because she didn't know where to go.*

This tension between "staying straight and returning to her old social world" was also found in a study by Sommers, Baskin, and Fagan.[84] These researchers noted that such a transition is not an easy task, as it implies living in a period of uncertainty and crisis.[85] During this process, the individual resigns from the beliefs that had formerly sustained their criminal attitudes and redefines their ideological views and social identity. As the Spanish officers noted, the interaction with Case X11 was initially challenging, and it was essential to identify her vulnerabilities before intervening effectively:

> *When the young woman arrived at the centre, we realised that she had serious emotional deficiencies, and that the few friends she had were no longer keeping in touch with her. Through sport, she found positive reinforcement, and we encouraged her to do so. Gradually, she began to interact with other women and groom herself, and she became interested in other issues. She managed to pass her university entrance exam and developed constructive thinking towards issues that she had previously viewed very rigidly. She became convinced that she had been manipulated and even apologised for what she had said on social media. In the end, she was remorseful.*[86]

Engaging in exercise and gaining the support of various individuals provided the woman (Case X11) with positive emotions, a key mechanism for countering extremist ideology. In a radicalised state, subjects tend to resist arguments unless they are accompanied by an emotional willingness to pay attention to them.[87] They also frequently perceive prison officials as the enemy, creating a barrier that is challenging to overcome. This sentiment may be intensified after negative experiences with public-sector employees. For example, three women sampled were rebuked for their offences. Their testimonies reflect how negative experiences or excessive disciplinary measures in prison affected them psychologically:

> *I had a difficult experience in the first prison I was taken to. Some officials spoke to me with a violent attitude or sarcasm, and I saw the psychologist once or twice in three months and she didn't show any interest in me either. Once she told me: "Wow, your parents will be proud of you." That was all I needed at that time. However, they transferred me to another*

> *centre, and everything changed. The staff and the technical team were different. From the beginning, they were interested in getting to know me, my story, and the radicalisation process I had undergone. They trusted me and gave me a chance* (CaseX11).

> *One of the officers who arrested me cursed at me. This attitude further reinforced in me the idea that they were my enemies. When you are treated badly, you tend to believe in the discourse of IS even more* (Case X4).

> *I was in prison when the attacks in Brussels and France took place. During that time, security levels increased, and I couldn't leave the cell unless escorted by four officials. They only allowed me to speak in Spanish on my phone calls... All of this eventually affects you psychologically in such a way that you end up believing that you are dangerous* (Case X13).

At this stage, when negative feelings and a context of suspicion have been established, it becomes even more difficult to provide proper treatment or to create effective communication between inmates and prison staff. According to the experience of Spanish officials, providing inmates with some form of incentive or reward was a helpful strategy for beginning to create a trusting environment. This approach of giving incentives enables prison staff to establish cooperative links with female inmates and promote a shared space of understanding, thereby reducing feelings of suspicion or uncertainty. The good behaviour shown by the women sampled also facilitated interaction between these two different actors. Interestingly, females convicted of terrorist offences in other European countries have been shown to share the same positive conduct in detention settings.[88]

Sometimes it is assumed that women convicted of terrorism offences support the doctrine of an extremist group. Notwithstanding, radicalised ideology may arise due to emotional deficiencies or may not manifest itself at all. Regarding this, prison officials emphasised the need to delve into the personal circumstances behind these women's involvement with the group in order to provide appropriate treatment. For instance, two women in the sample (Case X6 and X12) were psychologically and physically assaulted by their partners for years. Both females were arrested for attempting to join IS in Syria. The first woman was detained in Spain, while the second was apprehended in Turkey along with her husband and daughter.

> *I know that after everything my husband did to me, it might be hard to understand why I would want to get back with him in Syria. But I was really angry about how he left me. I had to deal with eviction, take care of four kids, and, despite all, I just believed I had to stick with my husband. I had this idea that you are supposed to endure with a husband, and I needed a man by my side* (Case X6).

> *Another inmate had gone to Syria to follow her husband. She had no religious feelings whatsoever and had been controlled and abused by him. After the treatment we provided her, she came to tell us that we had given her freedom. During the two years he spent in prison, she divorced her husband who was serving a prison sentence in Morocco* (Case X12).[89]

Psychological abuse and intimate partner violence have been shown to have an impact on the mental health of individuals, potentially leading to a loss of self-esteem or depression.[90] Additionally, the deprivation of liberty brings about a series of effects on the mental health of individuals, including social withdrawal, sadness, and anxiety.[91] These can exacerbate pre-

existing psychosocial characteristics of prisoners that need to be addressed. One woman, who is not part of the sample and was serving a five-year sentence for recruitment in Spain, fell into a state of depression during her time in prison that led her to commit suicide. As related by one of the women sampled (Case X13): "We were in prison together and she was not well; she tried to go to Syria to sort out her problems. In prison she spent the whole day crying; she missed her son very much."

Feeling Validated and New Social Networks

During an interview with a woman from the sample (Case X9), she confessed that the reason she committed a crime related to terrorism offences was because she felt lonely and went on social networks to look for companionship. She had no friends and was married to a man of Moroccan origin who was 20 years older than her. "I had a boring life and that's why I started to go on the internet, and to keep in touch mainly with a man who talked to me about IS."

Loneliness is a state of mind that is linked to feelings of sadness, misunderstanding, or insecurity. When an individual experiences loneliness, he or she may seek support in other areas to compensate for this, which may have nothing to do with holding a radical view. In fact, when asked about this particular case, a psychologist explained that this woman (X9) was rather frivolous in her relationships, so her commission of the crime seemed to respond to utilitarian reasons rather than a sign of deep religious conviction. In fact, in prison, she began a new relationship with another inmate through correspondence that had her excited. She also said she had improved her self-esteem and insecurity thanks to the psychological treatment. From the beginning, she showed remorse for what she had shared on social media and never exhibited an extremist view.

Finding a path of inclusion was identified as a 'trigger event' for one woman in the sample (Case X4). She explained during her interview that she arrived at prison with extremely radical thinking, but she found a way out thanks to the positive feelings she experienced after interacting with a new social network:

> *When I entered prison, I was alone, isolated and without any support, so I became even more radicalised. When the centre's director left, the policy regarding us shifted. I started to participate in activities and engage with volunteers from outside. My change came when I felt I was treated like a normal person. Many people around me told me how wrong I was, but I did not listen or pay attention to them. In that state, you don't see it.*

Rejection and isolation perpetuate negative feelings, so interaction with a new group of people through which feelings are validated was also identified as indispensable for four women in the sample (Cases X2, X3, X10, and X11). The testimony describing the first experience in prison of one of them reinforces this point:

> *The first months [in prison] were very complicated. I couldn't talk to anyone; I didn't have any companions with something in common. I was nineteen years old and most of them were over forty. My loneliness doubled in two ways: the loneliness of being in a prison, within four walls, in an individual cell, and the loneliness of not finding anyone to talk to, or trying to forget a bit of the anguish and sadness that was eating me up inside. Those were very difficult days* (Case X11).

Research also indicates that when women begin to feel accepted and trusted within certain conventional social circles, their determination to exit from crime is strengthened, as their social and personal identities as non-criminals are reinforced.[92] Finding a supportive social network was a key event for the cases described above, considering the social stigma and the state of mind they have to deal with after being arrested for this type of crime.

For instance, most women stated that they had changed their character and the way they relate to people. Now, they admit, they are colder and more distrustful. One young woman in the sample observed that she no longer makes new friends so as not to have to tell them what she had experienced; in the past, if she ever did this, she felt rejected (Case X13). Another young woman expressed the same opinion. "Most of the friends I had before distanced themselves from me when I was arrested. Now, they only greet me, but they don't invite me to birthdays or other celebrations. I only have my family, who are the ones truly there in difficult moments" (Case X8). Before being arrested, both women experienced strained relationships with their close families, marked by frequent arguments over their support for IS doctrine and the adoption of new codes of conduct, such as stricter attire. Coming from moderately religious families, these changes became a source of conflict. However, after their arrest, these relationships began to mend and now serve as an essential pillar of support in their lives.

Being labelled as a terrorist is one of the factors that explains the difficulty of creating new ties, sometimes because individuals fear that contact with these inmates could get them into trouble with security forces. One woman expressed this concern: "We have a lot of baggage with this word; what does it mean to be a terrorist? I feel guilty for what I shared on the internet, but I am not a terrorist" (Case X9). Complementing this consideration, another woman showed dissatisfaction with the media's representation of her: "I am portrayed as a monster and I have family, I have children. I am not like that" (Case X6).

Most women are not aware of the seriousness of having committed these crimes and try to justify their actions as a self-defence mechanism. Nevertheless, media coverage and the exaggerated reaction of criminal law to certain types of crimes create a stereotypical narrative of these inmates that does not help their reintegration into society. For instance, Case X11[93] was expelled to Morocco when her sentence was fulfilled, despite the recommendations of the psychologist and educator who treated her in prison. The sanction was imposed in accordance with Art.57 of Organic Law 4/2000, which regulates the expulsion of foreign nationals.

> *She ended up recognising that she had been manipulated and even apologized for what she had said on social media. She was regretful, and despite all the advances she made while serving her sentence, she was expelled to Morocco. This decision was very unfair. In that country, she has neither immediate family nor a support network.*[94]

These specialists believed that despite any positive changes or attitudes the inmate showed during her time in jail, the seriousness of the crime for which she was convicted remained the most important factor. Moreover, expulsion does not serve any rehabilitation or reintegration purpose. According to the psychologist who treated Case X11, this decision can have negative consequences and reverse all the progress that has been made up to date. The feeling of helplessness or defeat was shown by more than one woman during the interviews: "No matter what I do, people will always think the same about me" (Case X5).

Conclusion

This study of the experiences of thirteen women convicted of terrorism offences in Spain reveals crucial insights for understanding the process of female deradicalisation and disengagement. The key factors influencing their change in attitude or mentality include disenchantment, the acquisition of new goals, and a sense of acceptance or integration into new social networks. Additionally, psychological treatment played a vital role in identifying the shortcomings and weaknesses of some of these women. Once identified, professionals could address the factors that contributed to the radicalisation process or the motivations behind committing such crimes.

The reasons behind experiencing a cognitive rejection of beliefs and simply ceasing criminal behaviour in these women are consistent with existing literature on deradicalisation and disengagement. Although this study is based on a small sample, some of the obtained results support the arguments put forth by other researchers on this phenomenon. Specifically, the outcomes in Cases X8 and X13 illustrate the connection between disengagement and deradicalisation, highlighting how the former can facilitate the latter through the acquisition of new goals, as noted by Kruglanski.[95] Moreover, the research literature has also identified the crucial importance of psychological support tailored to individuals' needs. Education and the feeling of being accepted by/or integrated into new social networks align with findings from studies on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and changes in criminal behaviour among female offenders.

Thus, one of the most noteworthy findings in this study is that some of the women in the sample had not committed crimes related to jihadist offences because of ideology, but due to other circumstances which had led them to do so. This is reflected by the analysis of the different primary sources used to conduct this research. Consequently, programmes designed to address this phenomenon should dispel the assumption that ideology or an extremist interpretation of religion is the sole motivator for all individuals committing these types of crimes.

The change these women experienced in prison did not result from a specific deradicalisation treatment but rather from measures outlined in general penitentiary regulations aimed at rehabilitating the entire prison population without distinction based on their crime. Considering this, it may be more advantageous to explore how broader rehabilitation strategies can impact individual transformation and promote these approaches, rather than developing deradicalisation programmes that inmates may typically distrust. These programmes could reinforce feelings of injustice or discrimination that promote radicalisation, as they target a specific group and may be perceived as stigmatising, potentially deepening the divide between the group and broader society. While this article specifically examines the situation of a limited sample in Spain, and further research is needed for more definitive conclusions, these findings may be relevant and tested in other countries facing similar issues.

Academics and counter-terrorism policymakers should focus on creating new motivations or roles for inmates in society, allowing inmates to gain a sense of worth, and establishing a robust network for them to integrate into the community upon release. This approach can help mitigate the stigma associated with having been in prison, enabling them to overcome the terrorist label and fostering reintegration into society, thereby minimising the risk of recidivism.

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Funding: This article was possible thanks to the funding the author received from the Spanish Ministry of Universities and the European Union-NextGenerationEU.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Prof. Mary Beth Altier for her helpful feedback on the early draft of this article. In addition, I extend my gratitude to the women who selflessly shared their private and traumatic experiences. I also thank the Spanish Secretary of the Penitentiary Administration for allowing this study, and the prison officials for their willingness to accept this proposal. Finally, thanks to the anonymous peer reviewers and the editorial team at Perspectives on Terrorism for their feedback.

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88 Mehra, Renard and Herbach, "Female Jihadis Facing…": 152.

89 Interview with a psychologist and educator, July 2019 referring to case X12.

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91 Sara Carou-García, "Yihadismo y Derecho Penitenciario. La prevención del extremismo violento en prisión desde una perspectiva tratamental", *Anuario de Derecho Penal y Ciencias Penales (ADPCP)*, LXXII (2019): 542.

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93 Case X11: Immediately after her arrest and before being prosecuted, Immigration Authority of Spain initiated an expulsion procedure, which was carried out when she finished her three-year sentence. This is an administrative sanction for foreign nationals who has been convicted of a deliberate crime punishable by a term of imprisonment exceeding one year. The expulsion may also be ordered for reasons of national security (Organic Law 4/2000, art.57)

94 Interview with a psychologist and educator, July 2019.

95 Kruglanski et al. "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization…"

About

Perspectives on Terrorism

Established in 2007, *Perspectives on Terrorism* (PT) is a quarterly, peer-reviewed, and open-access academic journal. PT is a publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), in partnership with the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University, and the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at the University of St Andrews.

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