

## A Second Chance? Dutch Muslim Women on the Reintegration of Female Returnees from Islamic State

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### Abstract

This paper presents the results of a mixed-methods survey of the perspectives of 208 Dutch Muslim women on the reintegration of female returnees from the Islamic State (IS). Based on the responses and written statements made by Dutch Muslim women of Moroccan, Surinamese and Turkish ethnicities, respondents perceived greater risks associated with different female returnees, especially if the community in which respondents lived were resistant to the idea. However, Muslim female returnees were seen in sympathetic terms when perceived as presenting fewer risks to national security. The study demonstrates how receptive different Dutch Muslim women are to the reintegration of female returnees from IS, where issues of identity and political culture also play a role. The findings suggest that successful reintegration also needs sustainable reintegration into an emotionally supportive social network on the one hand and that programs need community support and acceptance on the other. The gendered approach offers valuable insights on how Muslim women can play a crucial role in deradicalization.

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### Introduction

In the early stages of the self-declared Islamic State (IS), women fulfilled a supportive role for the organization by getting married, bearing children and performing domestic chores (AIVD, 2017b; Cook et al., 2018; Patel, 2017). However, with time and circumstances, their involvement increased when women were allowed, and took it upon themselves, to fulfil a more prominent role within the organization by spreading the ideology, recruiting, raising funds, fostering homegrown terrorism and carrying out terrorist attacks (AIVD, 2017b; Cook et al., 2018; Patel, 2017; Saltman and Smith, 2015). Some of these Dutch Muslim women

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were attracted by the prospect of marriage to a foreign fighter and the idea of starting a family in the caliphate. For others, the perception of the Islamic community, *Ummah*, being threatened created the desire and a sense of duty to defend their Muslim ‘brothers and sisters’, with women in jihadi organizations playing an important role in relation to state-building in the case of IS in particular (Khelghat-Doos, 2019).

For many Dutch women joining IS, there was also a search for identity and belonging (Windsor, 2018); a place where pious women could be respected and can practice Islam regardless of their national or cultural background (AIVD, 2017b; Bakker and De Leede, 2015; De Leede et al., 2017). While many women were coerced into joining the IS, a significant number left voluntarily, believing that the caliphate both empowered them but also provided them with the ideal solution to all their woes in the west (Pearson and Winterbotham, 2017). However, in practice the role of women and their degree of autonomy remains underestimated (Bloom, 2005; Cook and Vale, 2018; Patel, 2017). Too often women are believed to be naïve or harmless, thus victims rather than perpetrators (Brown, 2011; Cook et al., 2018; Pearson, 2015; Vale, 2019).

In recent periods, the motivation and involvement of women in terrorism have been extensively discussed, largely due to the high number of women who joined IS but are now in a state of limbo regarding return to their countries of birth. Deradicalization efforts are futile if the range of radicalization processes among women is not taken into account (Cook et al., 2018; Doosje et al., 2016; Gan et al., 2019). In addition, women have proven to radicalize quicker than men (Knoope, 2016), can possess narcissistic traits (Chabrol et al., 2019; Morgades-Bamba et al., 2019) or not radicalize at all (Brugh et al., 2019). At the same time, successful deradicalization initiatives are scarce, and existing programs have rarely been evaluated, while some have proven only partly successful. In addition, deradicalization is often viewed from a gender-blind perspective.

The objective of this research is to determine how receptive Dutch Muslim women, in particular, are to the reintegration of female returnees. This research addresses the perspectives of Dutch Muslim women on female returnees and questions re-integration as a

means of deradicalization, providing an original contribution to gendered perceptions and the importance of Muslim communities in this process.

### **Radicalization and Deradicalization: a Gendered Approach?**

Over 40,000 people from all over the world flocked to Syria and Iraq to join IS, including Dutch citizens (Cook et al., 2018). Of the 315 Dutch citizens who travelled to join IS (AIVD, 2019), one third of these were women. Their average age at time of travel was 23. As the Muslim community is diverse so are the returnees (Gradussen et al., 2018; Bergema et al., 2015). The majority is of Moroccan descent (46 per cent), followed by Dutch converts (17 per cent), Turks (10 per cent), Iraqis (7 per cent), Egyptians (4 per cent), Somalis (4 per cent), and others (12 per cent). Beyond those who travelled to IS, there are about 100 women who are thought to be adherents of regressive jihadist ideology but there are also about a thousand alleged supporters of jihadism in the Netherlands. Moreover, in the upcoming years, numerous jihadists who authorities know are persistent in their beliefs will be released from prison. The National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV, 2018) describes them as charismatic and experienced individuals. Presently, the majority of returnees are from the biggest cities in the Randstad: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht (Bahara, 2018; Bergema and Koudijs, 2015).

The General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD 2017a; AIVD, 2019) found that more than 100 Dutch women left to join IS in Iraq and Syria. While only a few have returned thus far, numbers are expected to rise. However, it is necessary to draw attention to the role of women within terrorist organizations because they could play a significant role in keeping the ideology alive, passing it on, recruiting new members, fundraising or even carrying out terrorist attacks abroad (AIVD 2017b), and this has implications for policies in relation to returnees. The return of Dutch IS-affiliates has occurred in different waves. The first was between 2013 and 2014, and prior to the declaration of the caliphate by IS in June 2014 (Renard et al., 2018). Early 2015 saw a second wave, but with the caliphate crumbling due to

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counter-terrorism efforts, another flow of returnees followed. The current third wave is considered far more dangerous as women have been exposed to IS ideology and activities for a longer period. They pose a threat to (inter)national security because they fled to survive whereas those returning earlier often came back disappointed or disillusioned (AIVD, 2017a; 2017b). Individuals committed to IS were forced out by circumstances such as the loss of territory or being captured and then sent to their home country. However, those sent abroad on missions to fight elsewhere remain of most concern to policy and society as a whole.

With IS losing all their territory, and the self-declared caliphate now no more, some IS-affiliates have already returned, but many women and their children remain in Kurdish camps (Cook et al., 2018; NCTV, 2018). Although these women left the caliphate, it cannot be determined if and to what extent they disengaged from their extremist ideas: the root problem for countries confronted with their citizens wanting to return (AIVD 2017b). With thousands of women anchored in Kurdish camps in Syria and the inability to determine if they still adhere to IS ideology, there has been an ongoing debate in many European countries about facilitating the return of female members of IS (and their children). Many European countries have expressed their discontent in getting these citizens back since they are considered to have the capabilities to disrupt society (Renard et al., 2018). The reluctance of EU member states is combined with officials who believe that women should be on trial in their native country. Kurdish officials, as well as the United States, have urged countries to take up responsibility for their own citizens (Omar, 2018; U.S. Department of State, 2019). Concerning the Netherlands, the Dutch Minister of Justice and Security stated that no assistance would be provided to people willing to leave the camps or the unsafe areas in Syria or Iraq unless they manage to reach the Dutch embassy in Turkey or Iraq (Grapperhaus, 2019). From that point onwards, they would be accompanied by the Royal Dutch Military Police and taken back to the Netherlands. Upon their return, IS members are to be detained, questioned and prosecuted. Eventually, returnees have to be reintegrated into society, but prior to that, they would be required to undergo a deradicalization program when in custody (Van der Heide and Schuurman, 2018).

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Many IS female sympathizers have attempted to carry out attacks in numerous countries in recent years (Cook et al., 2018; Europol, 2017). Between 2014 and 2018, women were involved in 33 separate plots in France, Belgium, Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom (Simcox, 2018). With approximately 100 women in the Netherlands still thought to be adhering to IS ideology, it places some urgency on the deradicalization of returnees to prevent them from re-radicalization or radicalizing others (AIVD, 2017b; Renard et al., 2018). However, for De Graaf (2010) this could strengthen the glamorous image of the female terrorist to sympathizers, but making female terrorists a public enemy could also make it difficult for women to leave the terrorist movement. Globally, countries continue to struggle to develop suitable deradicalization programs (Pearson et al., 2017). Research often alludes to deradicalization from other academic fields and interventions, often adopted from a more general and thus gender-blind perspective (Low, 2016). In addition, relevant studies inside Western Europe are scarce and not comparable with the Dutch approach, such as the Aarhus program that concerns deradicalization and reintegration, but is not focused on individuals that have committed criminal offences, or the Prevent strategy from the United Kingdom, which is criticized for its ‘community-led surveillance’ approach and thus believed to be counter-productive, especially in building participation, engagement and trust between the state and its Muslim citizenry (Abbas, 2019; Elshimi, 2017; Qurashi, 2018).

For Renard & Coolsaet (2018), the push factors of radicalization vary from one continent to another, but in Europe, social isolation, marginalization, polarization and stigmatization create a subculture that allowed IS to offer (for their target group) a suitable alternative. The rise of Islamophobia and xenophobia in the West, incite feelings of social and cultural exclusion and marginalization (Renard et al., 2018). Islamic State exploited the image of a global Muslim community that women could become part of. It appealed to their need to fulfil a sense of belonging and find female friends (sisterhood) and male suitors (AIVD, 2017b). These women longed for a place where they would not be confronted with societal discrimination or judgement from within communities. But while reintegration is not only necessary but also an important part of deradicalization, deradicalization itself is seen as a

difficult process, whereas disengagement is considered more feasible. Disengagement is referred to as behavioral change and deradicalization implies a cognitive shift – a fundamental change in understanding (EPRS, 2018). Disengagement allows people to have extremist views but deradicalization aims for detachment from radical behavior and extremist views. In the processes that lead to effective disengagement and deradicalization, the importance of social networks and the willingness of the receiving community to accept former perpetrators of violence play a vital role (Fink & Hearne, 2008).

Practice shows that deradicalization is a trial and error process, but there are also few success stories due to the limited number of participants (Van der Heide et al., 2018). Moreover, although officials often describe their deradicalization efforts as being successful, the criterion of the evaluation is based on ambiguous notions as they are often conducted by organizations that benefit from positive appraisals (Van der Heide et al., 2018; Koehler, 2017). The lack of successful deradicalization insights for Islamist extremists, nevertheless, remains a problem. Moreover, having finished a particular deradicalization program, returnees are expected to integrate into society, but there is no guarantee that they have been deradicalized. One of the main reasons that push people to reject society and pull them towards the ideology of IS is a lack of a sense of belonging, but if this reversed, they are less likely to give in to the tendency to hurt others (Cook et al., 2018; McMillan and Chavis, 1986). This is supported by research from the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN 2018), which shows community engagement and empowerment are important factors in the prevention of radicalization. As Veldhuis (2012) points out, the success of rehabilitation and reintegration depends on the willingness of the host community to adopt and accept the individual as a full member again.

Research shows that female extremist membership in some armed political groups gave them more freedom and opportunity than they would otherwise obtain in their own societies (Turkington and Christien, 2018). Deradicalization is complex because women who have already returned or will return to their home country will face several challenges, including distrust, hostility, stigmatization and isolation – and these issues may well have

contribution to join radical-extremist organizations. Thus, returnees can be confronted with peer pressure from IS-women support groups in their home country but also receive stigmatization from within the community (Amnesty International, 2018; Cook et al., 2018). Hence, insight into the attitudes of society is needed to make amends in deradicalization efforts (Eagly and Chaiken, 2007). This research is an attempt to provide these insights on the receptiveness of communities and how they can influence the success of the deradicalization process of returnees as face-to-face interaction and effective community relations are believed to play a key role in preventing (re)radicalization (Cook et al., 2018). In addition, this research allows for better understanding of Muslim community perceptions and how they influence community relations, helping also with policy development in this area. Since the cooperation of society is required to implement policies regarding deradicalization, public perceptions are of utmost importance. It is argued that ignoring public opinion may result in the failure of policies set in place for the deradicalization and reintegration of female returnees.

### Methodology

In order to discover the thoughts and opinions among female members of the Muslim community, a survey was distributed via community organizations that represented the interests of Dutch Muslim women, permitting the researchers the opportunity to reach a large number of people whilst offering participants a level of confidentiality and anonymity. While there were clear advantages of this process in that it is relatively quick and cost-effective, there are also limitations, including those faced by respondents in qualitative studies, namely a self-selection bias. To mitigate against the risks of skewed responses, the need to work with a range of different Muslim organizations to collect the survey data, including women only groups, and with different ethnicities involved, with a specific focus on comparative approaches, allowed, we argue, for the removal of much of the risks of bias. Ethical approval was gained from the university department affiliated to the authors. In the survey, an introductory section laid out the ethical implications of respondents taking part in this study,

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emphasizing the importance of anonymity, confidentiality and data protection with respect to the dataset. By ticking a consent box on the survey, the respondents were then eligible to take part in the study and their responses were then collated.

A survey approach was used in this study as it allowed for data collection from a large number of respondents. In general, Muslim women are a difficult to reach target group for a number of reasons, including their religious affiliation and suspicion of outsiders fostered by encounters with prejudice (Mohebbi et al., 2018; Wessels and Dijkman, 2012). Another factor to take into account is that subjects related to IS and Islam can arouse suspicion and are often approached with greater reluctance, especially if on behalf of the government (Awan, 2017). In order to gain insight on the attitudes of Dutch Muslim women and how they feel about returnees, one might argue that this is a sensitive subject and that qualitative research would have been a more suitable approach. However, because of the sensitivity of the subject, members of the community might not feel free to express their opinion (Soliman, 2017). As researchers, we made the decision to obtain generalized sentiments in a relatively shorter period of time than it would take to carry out detailed semi-structured interviews with a commensurate sample size largely due to the time and resources available to carry out this project and the need to generate a detailed snapshot of general opinion.

In terms of the process, respondents were approached by applying convenience sampling, snowball sampling and purposive sampling – all techniques familiar to social researchers targeting specific and hard-to-reach groups. To access the target group, the researchers first contacted Muslim women from their personal networks, and asked them to fill out the survey and forward it to their own networks. These networks were derived from professional and personal contacts and other interested in topics relation to women in the Netherlands. In addition, additional student and women associations consisting of Muslims were contacted. Since not all organizations replied or were willing to cooperate, the researchers reached out to women only and additional cultural groups on social media (Moroccan, Turkish, Indian, Pakistani and Afghan) and made a request to fill out the survey or to send it on to others. The survey was spread via an anonymous Qualtrics link on two

social media sites: Facebook and LinkedIn. The link was clicked on 323 times. A total of 208 women participated in the research of which 176 completed the entire survey. An overview of the survey sample is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Survey sample descriptive statistics

<b>Muslim Origins</b>	<b>Islamic Stream</b>	<b>Ethnic Origin</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Highest Education</b>
Born Muslim, 94.9%	Sunni, 85.8%	Turkish, 27.3%	17-24 years, 33.7%	Amsterdam, 24.4%	Secondary-vocational, 28.4%
Converted, 5.1%	Shia, 5.1%	Moroccan, 25.6%	25-29 years, 28.6%	The Hague, 23.3%	Higher-professional, 49.4%
	Other, 9.1%	Surinamese, 23.9%	30-34 years, 20%	Rotterdam, 11.4%	University, 18.2%
		Pakistani, 5.1%	35-39 years, 8%	Zoetermeer, 4.5%	Other, 4%
		Afghan, 4.5%	40-60 years, 9.7%	Utrecht, 4.5%	
		Kurdish, 5.1%		Other, 31.8%	
		Other, 8.6%			

Three women below the legal age of Dutch law participated in the survey. Their responses were excluded from all aspects of the data analysis, and although their perspectives, thoughts and opinions were considered relevant, they were ultimately excluded from the

study. The survey was in the field from 1 February to 31 March 2019. The questions were presented in a set order and were close-ended. A five-point Likert scale method was used because it allows for measuring attitudes and opinions with a great degree of nuance. Respondents could leave comments at the end of the survey and these were translated from Dutch into English. Respondents spent on an average 21 minutes on the survey. The results were analyzed using SPSS and ATLAS.ti.

The objective of this research was to obtain an insight into the attitudes of Dutch Muslim women in relation to female returnees from IS. It should be taken into account that the results are based on perceptions at a time where the return of women and their children was hotly debated. Though the respondents remain anonymous, there is a possibility respondents might have been inclined to give a socially desirable response. It should be taken into account that due to convenience sampling internal validity could be compromised, since the target group is much larger and a selective approach was adopted in spreading the survey in the networks of the researchers. In addition, the Muslim community is diverse, therefore this article is careful not to draw generalizations from the results. However, with the three biggest ethnic minorities in the Muslim community in the Netherlands being equally represented, this article will elaborate on the differences and similarities between these minorities. While the survey covered multiple subjects, this article nevertheless highlights notable results.

## Results and Analysis

About 63 per cent of women were convinced that *reaching out to and communicating with* female returnees could make them feel better understood. Concerning ethnicity, Surinamese women seem to be the most convinced respondents, with 71 per cent agreeing in comparison to 69 per cent of Moroccan and 48 per cent of Turkish respondents. The majority of women (61 per cent) believed that communicating with female returnees could help in discouraging women from returning to IS or the organization's ideology. Dutch Surinamese women (74 per

cent) seemed to have the most faith in communication in comparison with Moroccan women (67 per cent), and especially Turkish women (52 per cent). With respect to age, 72 per cent of respondents in the age group 25-29 years and 66 per cent of the age group 30-34 years agreed with this sentiment. Getting in touch with female returnees was considered *valuable* by 62 per cent and *important* by 70 per cent but above all, *interesting* (72 per cent) by all. Surinamese women in particular thought that engaging with female returnees would be *valuable* and *interesting*, whereas Moroccan women considered it *significantly important*. Overall, Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese women felt the same about this issue.

“I have seen videos about women who have gone there and have had children. They regret their decision and want to do whatever is in the best interest of their children. I think we should listen to their stories and show this to others. This can maybe prevent other women from making this decision.”

– Moroccan woman, aged 29, located in Arnhem

About 19 per cent of women believed that female returnees no longer posed a threat to society. However, 39 per cent believed that they still did because they *had not left the ideology behind*. About 36 per cent believed that female returnees still adhered to the ideology of IS. That is why 16 per cent thought that they do not deserve a *second chance*. Turkish women (21 per cent) were not willing to grant them a *second chance*, followed by Surinamese women (17 per cent) and Moroccan women (7 per cent). However, more than half of the respondents (52 per cent) believed that female returnees deserved a *second chance*. Therefore, there is reason to believe that there was a favorable attitude towards interacting with female returnees. However, respondents believed it was still necessary to look into each case separately:

“Every woman is different and every member who has left for IS has gone for different reasons I think. A woman who upon arrival there [IS-territory] was

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oppressed and considered a ‘slave’ of her partner or who was married off and then fled seems less dangerous to me. A woman who supported the ideology of IS and still adheres to the ideology, and then returns seems dangerous to me. This is a very complicated and therefore difficult matter because each woman is in a different situation. Fortunately, returned passengers are arrested at Schiphol airport and an investigation is carried out to what these people could have done there.”

– *Turkish woman, aged, 32, located in The Hague*

Many women were willing to give returnees the benefit of the doubt because they believed these women were able to change and should be given the opportunity to better their life. In addition, in light of a focus on prevention, their stories were considered important and could serve a valuable purpose. However, while there was a common understanding that *female returnees do not belong in Dutch society*, many women (46 per cent) still persisted in their intention to interact with the returnees. However, of those that strongly disagreed, university-educated respondents (19 per cent) seemed to be the most firm in their decision in comparison to higher professional educated (10 per cent) and secondary professional educated groups (10 per cent). In terms of age, women between 25 and 34 strongly disagreed with this sentiment. Furthermore, 61 per cent of residents in Amsterdam, 51 per cent in Rotterdam and 46.3 in The Hague disagreed. Regarding differences in ethnicity, the majority of Surinamese women (55 per cent) thought the Muslim community would be *worried* and less than a quarter (21 per cent) thought it would be perceived as *suspicious*.

In relation to Turkish women, 46 per cent stated that community members would be *worried* and 25 per cent thought it would be perceived as *suspicious*. Forty per cent of Moroccan women thought community members would be *worried* and 29 per cent thought it would be perceived as *suspicious*. This demonstrated that Turkish and Moroccan women felt fellow Muslims would perceive interactions as suspicious. The majority of women (56 per

cent) were convinced that community members would disapprove of their interaction with returnees. Some respondents believed they would be *rejected* by society:

“I think this group of women will be facing a lot of obstacles to be able to remain anonymous on the labor market. I think it will be tough for them on a psychological as well as physical level. In addition, they will have little work experience and a lack of self-confidence. In order to regain their trust, I think a lot will be invested in them. If I would engage with someone like that, it would definitely be disapproved by society. These women will be haunted by their own conscience. Whatever the circumstances were, they still deserve a fair chance.”

– *Surinamese woman, aged 53, located in Amsterdam*

The data suggests there to be unfavorable social attitudes towards female returnees. However, many women (46 per cent) were *interested* and *inclined to interact* with female returnees, even if the general opinion would be to exclude these women. Results showed that 52 per cent indicated that the norms, values and associated expectations of society were important. There was an interesting difference when looking into the largest ethnic groups. Of the Turkish respondents, 56 per cent indicated that the general opinion of society was important to them, followed by 43 per cent of the Surinamese and 42 per cent of the Moroccan respondents. Turkish women were much more inclined to meet society’s expectations than Moroccan or Surinamese women.

The vast majority of respondents considered themselves part of the Dutch society as well as the Muslim community. Referring to the experience of Moroccans, one woman stated:

“There is a wrong image about Muslims. I come across negative reactions on social media on a daily basis. Any news report that has something to do with Islam, Muslims or Moroccans receives intense responses, on which the number

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of comments are more than 1,000 or even up to 2,000. I can just feel the hate daily. I try to defend [Islam, Muslims and Moroccans] but there is no point in doing so. People already have an image in mind and are convinced that everything that has to do with the Islam is bad and violent when it is just a few or a small group of people that are ruining it for the majority. About 30/40 years ago prisons were filled with black people but the perpetrators are nowadays often of Arabic or from any similar looking descent, thus leading to people jumping to conclusions. This society is no longer a society. There are only ‘islands’ and residents pretend to have accepted each other but on social media, they express how they truly feel and what they think.”

– *Surinamese woman, aged 45, located in Amsterdam*

With a considerable number of women experiencing a lack of understanding from their environment when practicing their religion, it made sense that 58 per cent of women felt the need to defend their religion. It is interesting to note that in comparison to Turkish women (52 per cent) and Surinamese women (48 per cent), Moroccan women (73 per cent) were especially confronted with criticism regarding their religion. Although many women embraced their dual identity and considered themselves part of both the Muslim community and Dutch society, only 22.5 per cent believed they were considered part of Dutch society. Forty-six per cent indicated they did not feel like they were fully accepted members of Dutch society. Many Moroccans (69 per cent) experienced a lack of acceptance, followed by Turkish (42 per cent) and Surinamese (33 per cent) respondents. When looking at education, 52 per cent of women with secondary vocational education experienced a lack of acceptance, followed by 41 per cent of the higher professional and 41 per cent of the university-educated respondents. According to these results, lower educated women experienced a higher feeling of discrimination than well-educated women.

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When it came to the IS and its affiliates, nearly half of the participants (46 per cent) indicated that they considered IS and anyone affiliated as *extremists*. However, 39 per cent were inclined to think that IS-affiliates were *confused* rather than *extremists*. This could explain why a vast majority (66 per cent) did not view IS or IS-affiliates as *Muslim* but some respondents (8 per cent) did. With 80 per cent of Turkish women and 74 per cent of Surinamese women labeling IS-affiliates as *non-Muslim* compared to only 52 per cent of Moroccan women, it is clear that Moroccans tended to be less judgmental towards IS in comparison to other minorities. However, some women were less forgiving than others:

“Former IS-affiliates do not deserve a second chance. They have destroyed everything; their current live as well as the afterlife. God has given them brains but they did not make use of it. If Islam was this violent, there would not be that many people Muslim. Islam is a religion that gives love. What they believe in is the opposite. They do not belong in this society and as far as I am concerned, they could return to their violent country.”

– Turkish woman, aged 21, located in Utrecht

The vast majority of women within the Muslim community (82 per cent) were convinced IS and anyone affiliated with it was *dangerous*. Only a few respondents (2 per cent) considered them to be *harmless*. Nearly half of the women (45 per cent) labeled IS-affiliates as *reckless* but the other half (37 per cent) believed them to be rather *naïve*. About 31 per cent of Turkish women considered them *naïve*, followed by 35.7 per cent of Surinamese women and a much larger number of Moroccan women (53 per cent). Nearly half of the participants (47.8 per cent) thought IS-affiliates were *ignorant* and 34 per cent believed they were *misled*. An interesting difference occurred when it came to female returnees instead of IS-affiliates in general. Whereas 34 per cent of the participants believed IS-affiliated were *misled* and 37 per cent think they were *naïve*, 41 per cent of the respondents thought women who joined IS were *misled* and 47.8 per cent thought they were *naïve*. There was more

sympathy and understanding for female returnees than for IS-affiliates in general. IS-affiliates were considered far more *ignorant* and *reckless* than female returnees were considered to be:

“I think that the majority of female returnees of IS were victims of the ‘IS-fighters’ in Syria. They have been misled and taken to Syria, not knowing what to expect. They were treated horribly and when they had the chance, they fled back to the Netherlands. I believe these women need help to process all the traumatic experiences, to be able to reintegrate and lead a better life. Of course, there are some that still have radical thoughts but it is mainly the men who really pose a threat.”

– *Surinamese woman, aged 19, located in Amsterdam*

Many respondents (44 per cent) believed female returnees were still *dangerous* and only 14 per cent considered them *harmless*. Despite many Dutch Muslim women considering female returnees as a threat to society, they were hesitant to label these women as *perpetrators*. They understood that some female returnees had been coerced and others joined IS voluntarily. Although many women (44 per cent) were not sure whether to label female returnees as perpetrators or victims, there were more women viewing these women as *victims* (29 per cent) than *perpetrators* (28 per cent). The excerpt below substantiates this point. Pertaining to the female returnees, 34 per cent of the respondents no longer viewed them as *Muslim*, whereas 24 per cent still did:

“I would not dare to label someone a non-Muslim, only God can do that. I honestly believe that these people think this is part of the ‘jihad’. From stories from acquaintances I have noticed that these women often do this out of ‘love’. A woman will not immediately choose to follow this stream of Islam out of free will.”

– *Moroccan woman, aged 24, located in Amsterdam*

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Yet again Moroccan women seemed to be less judgmental, with only 27 per cent labeling the female returnees *non-Muslim*, whereas 31 per cent of Turkish women labeled the female returnees *non-Muslim* and this was 40 per cent for Surinamese women. Overall, the results show that women tend to be more forgiving and lenient towards female returnees than IS-affiliates in general.

### Discussion

This study has identified that women within the Dutch Muslim community were divided over what to think of Muslim female returnees from IS. A small number of women were completely against the return of former female members of IS because they believed these women could not change. Women of Turkish descent seemed to be the most skeptical. However, many women were cautious in condemning female returnees and believed that each woman must have had different motivations to leave the Netherlands and join IS. Hence, they were convinced each case should be reviewed individually to determine if and to what extent every returning individual posed a threat to society. The majority of women seemed to have a relatively positive attitude towards female returnees, especially Moroccan and Surinamese women and to lesser extent Turkish women. Many women considered it necessary to reach out to female returnees to stimulate engagement because they believed this would help these women to be better understood and be more connected to their environment, thus implying involvement of community and society can make a difference and is therefore necessary. Women between 25 and 34 seemed to be more understanding, convinced that communication is the key in countering any radical thoughts female returnees might possess.

Many women were convinced they could easily deal with pressure and prejudices from society and would not be influenced by general societal expectations regarding engagement with female returnees. Women from all educational levels, especially the well-educated, were confident of their opinion. When it came to differences in age, women between 25 and 34 tended to be less sensitive to the influences of society. Though many

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women from larger cities in the Randstad (Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague) seemed to be less prone to resistance, women residing in the capital city tended to be more open-minded and more determined about interacting with female returnees than others. For many women, the norms, values and expectations of society, as well as the hopes of their parents or close family members, tended to be important to them. However, the more educated the women the less important it was that they should meet the aspirations of others. Yet many women within the Muslim community were convinced their engagement with female returnees would not be supported but rather disapproved by society. Turkish and Moroccan women, in particular, felt they would be judged and could even create suspicion if they interacted with female returnees. Overall, many women were convinced that the general opinion towards female returnees was rather negative. At least half of the respondents were confident that the wider members of the Muslim community would disapprove of their engagement with female returnees.

The results showed that a vast majority of women considered themselves part of both the Muslim community and Dutch society. However, there was an indication that some women felt far more connected with the Muslim community rather than with Dutch society. Membership of Dutch society added to a shared national identity but membership of the Muslim community gave substance to a religio-ethno-cultural identity. Though many women identified themselves with the existing norms and values of society, they were not sure whether all members of society reciprocated their positive attitude towards it. Many women had been confronted with discrimination, often having to defend their religion. This led to over one-third of the women believing that they were not considered full members of Dutch society. From the comments provided, it appears Moroccan women in particular struggled with criticism and misunderstandings regarding their religion, thus making them feel less accepted by society. This could explain why Moroccans tended to be less inclined than Turkish or Surinamese women to label IS-affiliates as non-Muslim. Moroccan women seemed to be much more understanding of female returnees, which could also be explained by the fact that most of the Dutch women that joined IS were from Moroccan descent (46 per cent). Turkish and Surinamese women were clearly disapproving. Many Turkish women struggled

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to find their place in society; they often had to defend their religion and while a vast majority of Surinamese and Moroccan women can clearly identify with Dutch norms and values, many Turkish women remain somewhat hesitant. Surinamese women experience a higher level of acceptance by Dutch society than Turkish and Moroccan women and they also tend to experience less criticism regarding their religion in comparison to the other two ethnicities. This could be attributed to religion fulfilling a less prominent role in the daily lives of Surinamese women, which might lead to them displaying less visible signs of their religious beliefs than Turkish or Moroccan women. It could also reflect on the biases held by majority Dutch society in relation to Islam and Muslims in general. There has been a normalizing of Islamophobia that significantly impacts on the Dutch Muslim experience, reflecting a wider shift in relation to sentiments of anti-immigration, xenophobia and Islamophobia that has engulfed many Western European countries.

A number of women argued that female returnees were less dangerous, misled and naïve individuals, which confirms that the role of women in terrorism is still underestimated, but the vast majority of women considered IS-affiliates to be dangerous, with half of these women perceiving female returnees as dangerous. There seem to be two camps: women that to some extent felt they understood what pushed female returnees to join IS and women that considered joining IS as unquestionably wrong. With many women experiencing resistance from society, by labeling female returnees as non-Muslim or perpetrator, these women clearly dissociated themselves from anyone affiliated with IS. Since IS was considered by many to consist of extremists, anyone affiliated, including female returnees, were deemed part of the out-group and viewed as “the other”. Though many women considered IS-affiliates to be much more dangerous than female returnees, they were hesitant to label female returnees as victims. However, because many Muslim women did not feel accepted by Dutch society and experienced criticism regarding their religion while trying to fit in, there was reason to believe that some Muslim women would exclude female returnees or avoid interaction to preserve or strengthen their positions in Dutch society. This could contribute to the isolation and marginalization of female returnees who, in the process of reintegrating, are looking for

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support from within the Muslim community. To ensure effective re-integration, a level of acceptance on the part of wider society but specifically the Muslim communities from which many originated is also necessary. This is largely contingent on the perceptions that Dutch Muslim women have of their status in Dutch society, with the irony that many who did leave to join IS felt that the Netherlands could no longer be their home. But in joining IS and discovering the fallacy of the caliphate, returning becomes a question of survival, at one level, but the question of belonging remains fundamentally central to how matters evolve. The fact that there is political and cultural resistance to the return of Muslim women who foolishly, reluctantly or willingly joined IS at a general level, which is internalized by Dutch Muslim women too, suggests that numerous challenges intersect. The question of ethnicity is also relevant because of the 100 or so Dutch Muslim women who joined IS, while many as half have Moroccan ethnicity, with few or no Turkish or Surinamese implicated, the other half is native Dutch women who converted to Islam.<sup>2</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts

The objective of this research was to explore the attitudes and behavior of Dutch Muslim women towards the reintegration of female returnees and to illuminate current or arising differences that could complicate the deradicalization through reintegration of these women. Women within the Muslim community approached the possible return of female returnees from IS with caution. While the majority of women seem to be understanding and willing to reach out to female returnees, many were convinced that taking the initiative to communicate with female returnees could make a difference to the women and make them feel better understood, thus offering solidarity. They believed it was important to bridge the distance between them and listen to what these women had been through and how these experiences affected them. The stories and experiences of female returnees could be valuable in preventing other women from joining the IS. Despite the mainly positive attitudes, many

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with senior Dutch policing figure.

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women understood that there were risks connected to the return of these women. With the knowledge that women had different motivations to leave their home country, the women in the study were aware of the fact that there is no archetypical female returnee. They understood that while others might have been coerced, some female returnees left for Syria or Iraq voluntarily. There felt support from within the community to welcome female returnees back into the community but this was mainly focused on the women who had been coerced to join IS. Many women were convinced female returnees deserve a second chance to be part of their community and Dutch society again.

The receptiveness towards returnees has not only to do with the female returnees themselves but is also dependent on other underlying factors, such as the social identity of women from the Muslim community (cf. Shapiro and Maras, 2019). Except for being Dutch, which is their national identity, the women in the study also have a religious identity, which makes them part of the Muslim *Ummah*. Women from the largest minority groups (Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese) have a primarily positive attitude towards the reintegration of female returnees; however, Moroccan women were the most supportive minority group in relation to female returnees. This was possibly a result of their own struggle to find their place in society, substantiating the role and impact of Islamophobia. It makes them understand what female returnees might have gone through and what caused them to take the step to join IS, especially given that half of the 100 or so women who went to IS have Moroccan ethnicity. Turkish women were supportive too, but they were hesitant to reach out to female returnees because they felt more connected to Dutch society and, arguably, would not wish to lose the position they gained through integration. Hence, they seemed more reserved about female returnees. In addition, Turkish and Moroccan women experienced a higher level of feeling of being judged by fellow Muslims if they interacted with female returnees, whereas Surinamese women experienced a feeling of care and involvement from their fellow Surinamese Muslims. This demonstrates discrimination from within Dutch Muslim communities plays a role. Moroccan women also tended to experience more criticism regarding their religion than others, making them question their social identity.

Of all the respondents, women between 25 and 35 years were most confident about the power and influence of communication, and that they could make a difference. They also tended to be less sensitive to the opinions of society. It indicated that women of this age group pose the most autonomy in comparison to much younger or older women. The same is the case for well-educated women. When it comes to geography, women residing in the capital city seemed to be least concerned with the pressures of society. In both The Hague and Amsterdam, women felt more at ease with *existing norms and values* (equality, freedom and human rights). Yet many women experience resistance, which makes them feel as if they are not considered full members of Dutch society, which could be attributed to generalized Islamophobia. Moroccan women and women with lower education were more likely to present this sentiment. In general, women tended to be more forgiving, understanding and connected towards female returnees than IS-affiliates in general. However, there was a common understanding that there is a difference between the women who were oppressed and coerced, and the women who chose to lead the lifestyle they had in IS-territory.

Though many Dutch Muslim women seem to be confident about their decisions to interact with female returnees, it cannot be denied that the norms of society and close family members were important to women and influenced their decision-making (cf. van San, 2018). Despite many women being open to reintegration on a personal level, from the wider Muslim community's point of view, they would not communicate with female returnees if engagement was not accepted. Though they understood the importance of communication and expressed their interest in interacting with the women, they would not go against the norms of their local communities. Therefore, it is highly probable that female returnees will be isolated and stigmatized. This, in turn, serves as fuel for re-radicalization and endangers the deradicalization process of female returnees. If Muslim female returnees are granted the opportunity to be part of the community again, they will be more inclined to search for a sense of belonging within the community. Therefore, it is necessary to bridge the gap between returnees and wider society. Deradicalization requires a cognitive shift in which individuals

must let go of their radical thoughts and ideas. The involvement of the Muslim community and wider society is important to stimulate this shift and prevent relapse.

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