

# WOMEN ON THE OUTSIDE: THE FEMALE SPOUSES OF MEN INCARCERATED FOR TERRORISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

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## THE ISSUE

In recent years, a spotlight has been cast on women's increasing involvement in violent extremism in the Philippines. In the aftermath of the Marawi Siege in 2017, the wealthy, educated matriarch of a powerful family was alleged to have acted as the mastermind of the violence, and coordinated the logistics and financing that enabled the siege to take place.<sup>1</sup> In January 2019, a woman together with her husband carried out a devastating suicide bombing in a cathedral in Jolo.<sup>2</sup> In April 2019, four women who were reportedly wives of Abu Sayyaf Group commanders, and responsible for the group's logistics and finances, were arrested.<sup>3</sup> Educated Filipina women have become leaders in terrorist financing and recruitment.<sup>4</sup>

Common to the profiles of each of these women is that none of them acted alone. Whether their acts of violent extremism were as recruiters, financiers, logistical support or as suicide bombers - each woman acted together with her male spouse.

While these high-profile cases draw attention to women's collaboration with their husbands in committing acts of terror, little is known about the situation of women who have not engaged in violent extremist activities but whose husbands have. For women in the Philippines whose husbands are incarcerated on terror-related charges, understanding their experiences and vulnerabilities as wives and sole parents living on the outside is critical to supporting them and their children, and preventing their own recruitment into the terror networks of their husbands.

In early 2019, UN Women supported research on the situations of 14 female family members of spouses who were either facing charges for terrorism-related cases or already convicted. The research included four focus group discussions with the female family members and validation with the incarcerated spouses. It was intended to capture their experiences and to identify whether common patterns exist, including in their vulnerabilities to recruitment and engagement in violent extremism.

## WHO ARE THE FEMALE SPOUSES OF MEN INCARCERATED OR CHARGED ON TERRORISM-RELATED CASES IN THE PHILIPPINES?

As of March 2019, there are 126 individuals sentenced on terrorism-related charges and 103 persons deprived of liberty awaiting trial in the National Capital Region in the Philippines.<sup>5</sup> Those sentenced are incarcerated with the Bureau of Corrections, while those awaiting trial are in the High-Risk Jail Facility of the Bureau of Jail Management of Penology in Manila.

There is no single profile of the women spouses of these men. The respondents to UN Women's research come from both poor and middle income backgrounds. They range from having completed only primary education, to being a licensed teacher. Some come from religious families, while others do not. On average, they have four children. All of the women interviewed come from Mindanao and have migrated to Manila to be near their incarcerated spouses.

## WHAT ARE THE COMMON CHALLENGES FACED BY WIVES OF MEN INCARCERATED ON TERRORISM CHARGES?

**Psychosocial Vulnerabilities:** All of the women experienced stigma in having a spouse incarcerated on terrorism-related charges. They have a lack of support systems, including a lack of livelihoods and an absence of family resiliency programmes. The lack of family support programmes heightens the vulnerability of the female spouses and their children. The children are particularly susceptible to engagement in violent extremist activities as they have been left with their mothers as sole parents to care for them. In two cases, jail wardens delivered psychosocial support directly in the form of counselling to the children and conducting informal "family conferencing". The women noted their children harbored feelings of resentment and anger towards the government for the perceived injustice that their father was taken away by the police and military. The mothers saw this as being particularly pronounced among male children during their early adolescence and that they often desired to quit schooling. The children experienced stigma, including due to being Muslims living in Manila. One daughter reported that her wearing a niqab<sup>6</sup> was associated by non-Muslim classmates as her being an ISIL supporter. A lack of educational support, school interventions to address stigma, and financial support to continue schooling may all heighten the risk of children leaving school early and becoming susceptible to joining their father's radical networks.

**Socio-economic vulnerabilities:** All of the respondents were economically dependent on their spouses, prior to incarceration. While in prison, the respondents took on the role of the household head and primary caregiver of the family, yet remain economically dependent on the support of relatives and friends. Migrating to Manila to support their husbands removed them from economic opportunities such as farming or fishing. In some cases, the women bring food rations to the prison to sell to other inmates. This economic instability may increase their risk of engaging in the terrorist networks of their spouses to gain financial support.

**Access to Justice:** A number of the women have had their male spouses incarcerated for over a decade. Most of the cases are either pending, on appeal, or unresolved, and the female spouses may have been engaging with the corrections system for nearly two decades. Lack of financial capability to pay for a private lawyer, postponements of trials, long delays in resolving criminal cases, and the long wait for the calendaring of cases are all factors that can build discontent with the justice system for female spouses and heighten their vulnerabilities.

**Lack of gender-sensitive religious or other platforms for support:** Cultural and religious norms limit the women's access to religious education, and they are primarily confined to household duties. At the community level, no local imams<sup>7</sup> or aleemats<sup>8</sup> engage the wives to provide spiritual guidance or support. The local

masjids<sup>9</sup> do not play a proactive role in the family lives of their households. Broader social support is also lacking. Their use of social media is limited to reading Facebook status posts. Their lack of knowledge about social media engagement may be a missed opportunity to ventilate their grievances and seek support.

## SUPPORTING WOMEN ON THE OUTSIDE: WAYS FORWARD

Minimizing stigma toward the wives of men detained on terror-related charges and supporting them to prevent the radicalization of their children can limit their vulnerability to engaging in violent extremist activity themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Recommended interventions to support the women spouses in the Philippines include:

- Implementation of the **Philippines National Action Plan for P/CVE** should ensure that **economic and psychosocial support programmes** are established for the female family members of those incarcerated on terrorism-related charges;
- **Access to legal information** should be enhanced to support the engagement of families with the judicial and correctional system and limit their anger to Government institutions;
- **Detention facilities should engage family members** of detainees in 'family counselling' to promote the well-being of wives and children, and the continued schooling of children;
- Muslim religious leaders should support the religious and emotional guidance of the family, and **madaris<sup>11</sup> should provide education for women** to enhance their access and opportunities for employment, empowerment and livelihoods;
- **NGO and religious organizations** should be linked to detainee families to facilitate their integration in communities, and **combat stigma**;
- Security protocols with local authorities, including schools, should be developed to **protect the identities of family members** of those detained on terror charges to minimize their vulnerability to recruitment or retaliation from violent extremist groups.

## END NOTES

- 1 <https://www.rappler.com/nation/172513-farhana-maute-arrested>
- 2 <https://www.rappler.com/nation/236181-afp-confirms-report-indonesian-couple-behind-jolo-cathedral-bombing>
- 3 <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2019/04/18/1910883/sayyaf-logistics-couriers-recruiters-nabbed-zamboanga>
- 4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/24/world/asia/isis-philippines-syria.html>
- 5 Garment of clothing that covers the face
- 6 Terrorism Related Case statistics as of March 2019
- 7 Male Muslim religious leaders chosen by the community to lead Islamic prayers and service
- 8 Female Muslim religious leaders chosen by the community to lead Islamic prayers and services.
- 9 Arabic word for a mosque
- 10 A.Rufaedah and I.E Putra, "Coping with Stigma and Social Exclusion of Terror-Convicts' Wives in Indonesia: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis", The Qualitative Report 2018, Vol 23. No.6 <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3118&context=tqr>
- 11 Plural of madrassa, referring to an establishment of learning where the Islamic sciences are taught; a Muslim school, college, or university that is often part of a mosque

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Production coordination: Catherina Medaglia Gonçalves dos Santos