

# Walking the Line: Prevent and the Women's Voluntary Sector in a Time of Austerity

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Women have a role to play in all areas of life – public and private. This includes being and building bridges to communities, in attempts to tackle radicalisation and extremism. International bodies such as the United Nations recognise the crucial role that women play at local, regional, and international levels in conflict prevention and peace processes across the world. This includes work to tackle religious extremists in their communities. The UK Government, like many others, recognises the role that women can play as bridges to their communities and has worked hard to engage Muslim women in the work of its Counter Extremism Strategies.



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However, in this article, I want to express a concern with the way this engagement has ignored the valuable work undertaken by women, over many years, highlighting their concerns about the spread and impact of fundamentalist forces from across faiths and in different parts of the world. These women include those of faith and none who have shared their expertise and knowledge through platforms such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and Women Against Fundamentalism (see Sahgal and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis, 2014) who were addressing their concerns long before the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror. Indeed, many of the women involved in *Feminist Dissent* have

been warning of the dangers of fundamentalist forces operating within the UK. Sadly, many of these contributions have at best been relegated to history or at worst dismissed by State institutions and some community-based groups as anti-faith and anti-Muslim.

### **Called to the frontline**

In recent years, there has been a concerted effort by the police and Government to engage Muslim women in tackling extremism in Britain's Muslim communities. This targeting of Muslim women is nothing new (Rehman, 2014). Since the days of New Labour, the UK Government has recognised that Muslim women are a significant resource in their attempts to tackle radicalisation and extremism in Muslim communities. Muslim women have had an increasingly high profile when it comes to tackling radicalisation, perhaps none more so than Sara Khan, former Director of Inspire, who was recently appointed Counter Extremism Commissioner. 'Inspire' is a non-governmental organisation aiming to address gender inequality and Islamist extremism. It is worth noting that whilst the Government's Counter Extremism Strategy states its aims as tackling all forms of extremism, including Islamist and Far-Right extremism, white women and women from other communities where fundamentalists and extremists are known to be active, such as Hindu, Sikh, and Christian fundamentalists, have not been targeted or seen as a resource for the police and others in the same way as their Muslim sisters. I have written about the focus of the Counter Extremism Strategy on Muslim women and the need to include ALL women if the Government is truly committed to a whole society approach (Rehman, 2014), as called for by the former national police lead for counter-extremism and terrorism, Commissioner Mark Rowley (Rowley, 2018).

### **Prevent, Women and Women's Organisations**

When I first began writing and researching this article, I wanted to find out if women's organisations, particularly those working on violence against women and girls (VAWG), were being engaged to work on counter-extremism initiatives and how this may be impacting on services. I contacted a number of VAWG organisations, including some that provide specialist services to BME women in December 2017 and January 2018. I wanted to find out about their experiences of Prevent and counter-extremism strategies. I contacted some organisations directly and others made contact, following a request placed in a sector newsletter for information.

Fifteen women's organisations responded to my call for information and a number of women working in the women's sector were willing to talk to me directly. However, they all insisted they would only speak to me if I guaranteed their names and locations remained confidential in this article. This view was expressed irrespective of whether or not the organisations or individuals were/are in receipt of funds from, or engaged in, counter-extremism work. I spoke to Muslim women and women's organisations, BME women's groups, and others in the women's sector. Prior to making contact with these organisations, I had heard anecdotally that there were different and conflicting views of the Government's Counter Extremism Strategy, with some in favour and others against. I had heard how some organisations felt they were expected to become 'arms of the State' as a result of counter-extremism processes but also, as they all said, 'a tool for immigration control'. However, a very different discussion emerged from my engagement with the women and women's organisations prepared to share information with me. These discussions focused on the shrinking of the BME women's specialist sector as a result of changes in commissioning regimes, the loss of secular spaces, but perhaps most concerning, the way the language around 'BME Women' has now been replaced by a focus on 'Muslim

Women'. Not only is a real narrowing of categorisation taking place here, but this new focus on a religious definition raises a whole set of new concerns about who falls within and without this grouping and, indeed, who is considered a 'Muslim woman'.

### **Prevent, Islam and Gender**

There were a number of key issues that emerged from my research. Common across all the conversations was suspicion about Prevent and a lack of confidence in the Government's counter-extremism strategies. As one woman said: 'it's just about targeting the community and putting us all under surveillance'. Another added:

A funder asked us to complete monitoring about how many Muslim converts came to our services, how many Muslim women used our services, and did their husbands go to the mosques. We tried to ignore it at first and then decided we had to respond. We don't collect that data and why would they need it anyway?

All of the organisations stated that their concerns about Prevent could not be divorced from the debates surrounding immigration, but anger was expressed about the increasing anti-immigrant/anti-Muslim rhetoric that was dominating political and public discourses and more so following the Brexit referendum. A number of respondents stated they believed counter-terrorist measures and immigration control were connected, but this was not supported by evidence in the interviews. One woman, who had been an advisor to the Government and later resigned, stated to me:

Just look at the news or what politicians say. They don't want immigrants here and they sure as hell don't want Muslims. We're the bad immigrants and they want rid of us. Prevent is being used as an excuse to get rid of Muslims.

It's important to note that many of those interviewed, like the woman I spoke to above, didn't distinguish between anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric, and so didn't make specific reference to non-Muslims who are also subject to increasingly stringent immigration control as part of the Government's 'hostile environment' policy. Many of my respondents also criticised what they saw as the prejudiced and over-simplified portrayal of those of Muslim background in the media. Many of those I spoke to expressed dismay at the lack of discussion about the gendered nature of anti-Muslim racism and/or the misogyny within and across fundamentalist movements. One respondent stated that:

There isn't a space to discuss things easily. Muslim men and religious groups are at all the meetings and it's hard to speak up about the issues affecting women. When I say about Muslim women experiencing high volumes of Islamophobia attack, it's because they are so visible and clearly identifiable by the way they dress. It's different for the men. But no one listens.

There was no discussion of the racialised nature of anti-Muslim prejudice by the women I spoke to. One respondent stated that she felt strongly that the state is undermining the safety of women, particularly Muslim women, in the name of 'protecting the safety of the state':

They want us to report to them about our husbands and sons if we think they're radicalised. Sometimes we just want some advice and help. Not a bloody police raid.

Another woman stated that the police 'never think about what might happen to us [i.e. as women]'. Many of the women I spoke to felt that Muslim women were being held accountable for the actions of men within their communities. As one said:

Why is no one making the connection that the terrorists are men? They are the ones radicalising our children and attacking people. It's the same for the far-right - just look!

Even when asked about women who are engaged in terrorist activities within fundamentalist movements, such as 'jihadi brides' and women involved in recruiting other women to join or support violent Islamist groups, many of the women remained clear that the overall power in these movements lies with men at all levels.

There was some support for work to tackle radicalisation and extremism within communities, but concerns about how this work was being done. One respondent informed me that:

I'd say that there is a genuine problem with people being recruited to violent, politicised organisations or actions in the name of Islam, just as is the case in the name of other ideologies and cults and politicised groups. And I can understand the desire to find interventions that may prevent these from materialising. I would say that it seems to me that any extremist organisation, whether it's BNP, weird cults or supposedly in the name of Islam are usually able to recruit followers around some key elements – some of which may be exacerbated by poverty and marginalisation ... This being the case, there is room for interventions which can disrupt or redirect such feelings and actions, irrespective of whether the organisation is 'Islamist' or anything else, into something positive but I think it would need some investment in healing divided, racist, polarised, unequal societies. If Prevent were doing that from that perspective, then it might not have become so toxic. But because it is coming across as a top-down, state-enforcement activity directed only at BME people of Muslim heritage and because it is so rooted in public services putting enforcement over service, and because it looks like it is being applied indiscriminately like a hammer to a nut with no nuance or understanding and to little beneficial effect – therefore for all these reasons, it's poisonous, mistrusted, and toxic.

A statement like this demonstrates the way that many of the women I spoke to agreed that there is a real problem with radicalisation and the dangers of extremist ideologies, but that they also felt that implementation of the Government's counter-extremism strategy had generated distrust, which has in turn, undermined the effectiveness of the very policies designed to address the problem.

Another respondent, who had worked closely with the government developing work to tackle extremism in Muslim communities, stated:

I was initially supportive of Prevent work as it seemed like it was community wide and there was enhanced capacity for funding for women's organisations. But the boundaries between counter-terror and community cohesion are blurring. There is also this emphasis on Muslim women as being able to prevent radicalisation and become the eyes of the state. I'm tired of this post-colonial attitude of Muslim women being 'othered' and instrumentalised in this way.

She told me of her experience of working with political leaders to develop counter-terror work. Initially invited to be part of consultations with community members, she stated that her concerns grew with each iteration of the Contest strategy 'as there were more and more fixed ideas about what is acceptable and I was worried about the impact on civil liberties'.

### **Prevent funding in a time of Austerity**

There are many women's organisations who felt that the problems with Prevent were such that they felt they could not be involved with it, and this included accessing funding. These organisations stated that they had spent many years engaging and working with local communities. They feared that being part of Prevent would have a negative impact on

relationships built up over many years and may also deter women from coming forward and seeking help. As one woman stated:

We've spent years working in the communities and it's not been easy. If the community thinks you're working with Prevent or there's something in the press about it – well, it just destroys your credibility.

Another was more direct and said: 'Look at Sara Khan – no one in the community will work with her cos she works for the government.' It was accepted that not engaging with Prevent could have a negative impact on how the organisation was viewed by others, including commissioning authorities and, given the difficult financial climate, made the survival of the organisation itself even more tenuous. One BME organisation had lost its funding from the Local Authority and expressed anger and upset that the funding cuts had resulted in the specialist work they were delivering in communities now being delivered by a 'generic women's organisation'. They told me of an encounter with a community engagement officer who, during the course of a meeting, disclosed that he had been funded by the counter-extremism unit to develop work with Muslim women:

It felt like a slap in the face. First our work was given to a generic women's organisation and then the money that would have funded the work we were doing on the ground is now being used by the counter-extremism unit to do the work we've been doing for years, without any other reason than to help women. They don't have the experience, expertise ... it took years to build those relationships and make women feel safe coming to us.

This illustrates one of the issues I referred to earlier, which points to the way the availability of Prevent-related funding in the context of the slashing of funding for women's organisations across the board has distorted the shape of the women's sector, but also contributed to the

distrust around the Prevent agenda more generally, even by people who can clearly see the problems it is trying to address.

This atmosphere of distrust has had a negative impact across the women's sector and those organisations that were in receipt of funding for counter-extremism work were very nervous about this being widely known. They expressed concern that women may be deterred from seeking help if they knew this, but they were also afraid of how male community leaders, who had not supported their work, would use this against them. As one woman said:

better to be part of the work 'cos at least then you know what's happening and what's wanted ... if the men knew they'd have a field day. They already blame us for women leaving their families. If they knew where some of the money comes from I dread to think ...

I was told by several respondents that women were worried about seeking help about violence and abuse because they feared that this may place their children at risk of 'surveillance'. This further demonstrates this atmosphere of distrust around Prevent.

In the past three decades, it has been secular BME women's groups who have led the way in tackling violence against women and girls in minority communities and compelling the government and statutory bodies to develop responses to violence against women and girls. This has resulted in changes in legislation and policies.

Other organisations often accessed Prevent-related funds as a means of sustaining the organisation in an increasingly challenging fiscal climate. As the Government proposes new legislation to tackle domestic violence and abuse, hails convictions in two forced marriage cases, and champions

efforts to eradicate harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, the violence against women and girls sector continues to face unprecedented cuts to its funding. Women's organisations, like others in the voluntary and community sectors, have voiced their concerns about the devastating impact of the closure of vital services as a result of austerity measures, the Localism agenda, and commissioning arrangements. Imkaan (2016) reported on the disproportionate impact of funding cuts on BME women's services.

The funding landscape and the challenges faced by women's organisations dominated the responses I received. Two organisations revealed that, in response to extreme financial challenges, they had been forced to change the identity of the organisation. The Director of one service told me that it was with a heavy heart that she and the board decided, during the course of a review and restructure, to shift the identity of the organisation from BME women to Muslim women in order to access funding from counter-extremism funds and from other funding sources. As one of the Directors said: 'Everywhere we looked for funding, it was all pitched at "Muslim women" only. We felt like we had no other choice.' The other Director stated: 'After all, most of the women are Muslim anyway and there is lots of money for engagement with Muslim women. It was a case of survival for us, but also kept the services there for the women.'

When I asked what had happened to women from non-Muslim communities, I was assured that they were still in receipt of support: 'We're still helping them. We have to - we just don't tell the funders.' Whilst somewhat reassured by this statement, I remain concerned that this will not remain the case in the future. Non-Muslim women may not wish to engage with the service and the question remains: where will

they go, given the ongoing cuts to BME services? But further to this, I also wonder about the choices Muslim women wishing to access specialist services will have and how these services will operate in the future. What about Muslim women who wish to access secular, specialist BME services and are not faith-based? What about Muslim women who wish to leave their faith, do not practice, how are issues of sexual identity addressed and women supported, what about sectarian differences e.g. Ahmadiyya are not considered Muslims by other Muslim sects – how is this addressed by Muslim women’s organisations?

There are also the questions about the organisations themselves and their relationships with others in the women’s voluntary sector. Will the women’s organisations in receipt of monies from counter-extremism funds compromise their independence and autonomy? Shaista Gohir, Chair of the Muslim Women’s Network, pointed to ‘the divisive nature of Prevent funding’. She feels that other faith and secular women’s groups are hostile towards Muslim women’s groups as a result of the Prevent funding being targeted towards them (Gupta, 2010), however, this was not a view reflected in any of the views from my respondents.

I would argue that the cuts to services will have ongoing consequences, not least for BME women – limiting the choices available to them, reducing their identities to faith alone, and thereby denying the diversity and richness of Muslim communities from different ethnic and national backgrounds, as faith identity trumps all others. It also flies in the face of government rhetoric on integration. Specialist BME women’s services have developed innovative and creative ways of bringing women from diverse national, ethnic, and faith backgrounds together through various activities and promoted integration. It is really imperative that more

detailed research is carried out along these lines so that the impact these different changes are having can be understood and addressed.

The re-branding of these organisations from 'BME' to 'Muslim women' has not only helped ensure the future sustainability of the organisation but has also had other impacts. As one of the Directors stated:

We're now invited to so many more meetings and included in so much more work. We've always worked with Muslim women but now it's like the Council and police have just worked this out. We get to know about lots of other bits of work, bits of funding, suddenly everyone likes us. We're still the same people doing the same work with women but somehow we're seen differently. I don't understand what's changed.

### **Prevent and the funding of faith based groups**

Those groups that did not identify by faith and/or were clear about a secular identity stated they had expressed concern that their work was no longer recognised and that they were excluded from meetings about radicalisation despite having worked in communities, including Muslim communities, for many years. One woman who spoke to me said: 'It's like we're all being divided up again. They [the Government] ... don't want us to get along or to be together.' The entrenchment of faith-based identity politics was a significant concern for all the women and women's organisations that responded to my call for information. Many were concerned at the framing of Muslim women. At a time when Muslim women in Iran and Saudi Arabia are protesting for the right to remove their veils, one woman said: 'The hijab-wearing Muslim woman is now the only image of Muslim women you ever see here so if you don't you're not a proper Muslim.' Another woman stated:

You have to be the right kind of Muslim to be listened to ... It's not about wearing the hijab, it's just you have to talk about being Muslim in everything you do.

Other felt those wearing the hijab or dressing traditionally were considered 'authentic Muslims'. Yakin Erturk, former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls has warned that 'the reassertion of culture and religion as core aspects of identity runs the danger of essentialising and fixing the cultures of others, naturalizing inequality' (in Kelly, 2016:6). Concerns were expressed by many of the women and women's organisations at the way debates and tensions along these lines are playing out in the women's sector through the issue of faith. Pragna Patel has noted that:

Pursuit of the faith based agenda is partly to do with a perceived need to appease conservative religious leaderships within those communities, and partly in the belief that the right to manifest religion signifies equal treatment of minorities – a belief shared by many in the equality and human rights institutions across Europe and amongst considerable sections of the so called progressive left movements ... Our concern ... is that in the process, the State is unable to distinguish between valid or legitimate demands for equality and those that simply mask inequality, promote other forms of inequality and uniformity of religious identity (2013:44-5)

This point chimes with the concerns of many of the women's organisations I spoke to. These groups expressed anger at the lack of space to discuss how faith has and continues to be a mechanism through which women and children are controlled. This control is exerted through promotion of traditional, conservative values regarding gender roles, the family, sexuality, and sexual freedom. There was also huge concern about the lack of space to discuss increasing evidence of faith being used as a mechanism through which women and children are abused e.g. abuse in religious institutions and by religious leaders, ritual and faith-based

abuses such as witchcraft and spirit possession, and intimidation of women outside sexual health and abortion clinics by right-wing, fundamentalist faith groups. Whilst faith is a comfort to many, we cannot afford to ignore how it is instrumentalised to oppress and subjugate women, children, and minorities too.

This article would be incomplete without some discussion of the concept of intersectionality (see Crenshaw, 2008; Hill Collins, P. and Bilge, S. 2016). An intersectional approach emphasises that women's particular experiences of violence and discrimination are the result of multiple oppressions – and that these oppressions are structural rather than individual. A recent Good Practice Briefing for the pan-London VAWG Consortium, Imkaan, states that:

An intersectional analysis has been fundamental in our work to end violence against Black and 'minority ethnic' women and girls. Intersectionality has provided the most useful framework for 'capturing' and understanding our individual and collective experiences. It has also been an important mechanism to ensure that our activities are always located in a broader struggle for social justice. For example, our commitment to 'by and for' dedicated, specialist Black and 'minority ethnic' women's organisations is rooted in an understanding that as minoritised women and girls experiencing multiple, intersecting inequalities, we have the right to organise and resist in ways that are defined by us, for us and with us (Imkaan, 2017).

However, the way in which Muslim women are being viewed and constructed is reducing who they are to a single identity – faith identity – and their oppression to be the result of anti-Muslim prejudice, discrimination or Muslim community structures. This approach denies the multiple and intersecting oppressions suffered by minority women

who come from Muslim backgrounds. It also limits the way in which anti-Muslim prejudice is linked to racism and how gender inequality is experienced by minority women both in and outside of their communities. This not to deny their faith identity but to acknowledge the multiple ways in which oppression works and results in injustice. Discussions about intersectionality, I would argue, have failed to take into account the rise of religious identity politics and the construction by the state and fundamentalist religious forces of 'Muslim women'. The Coalition of African Lesbians recently set out the reasons for why intersectionality is important when they argued that this approach 'rejects any hierarchy of one categorical determination over others and brings us to the conclusion that no form of oppression or subordination ever stands alone' (Coalition of African Lesbians, 2018). However, as the evidence in this article shows, Prevent and its implementation reinforces a hierarchy of identity by foregrounding religious identity but, in the case of Prevent, this is done with a particular focus on Muslim women and their role *both in perpetrating but also in preventing* Islamist terrorism.

This article has been based on work I have undertaken speaking to 15 women's organisations who responded to my invitation to speak about the impact of Prevent and the Counter Terrorism agenda on their services. This is limited evidence and represents work I would like to take forward as part of a more extensive and developed project. In spite of the limitations of the work presented here, a number of key themes do stand out. Firstly, in a context of austerity and cuts, the availability of funding related to counter-terrorism is reducing the capacity of the BME women's sector to respond to the needs of BME across the board and distorting the focus of the sector. Secondly, allied with this is the problem identified by many respondents concerned with mistrust about the Prevent agenda. This is something that must be dealt with as these concerns are coming from organisations which entirely see the problem

with the 'radicalisation' of women as an issue that affects them. Thirdly, secular inclusive services for BME women are being re-constructed around a focus on 'Muslim women' which is not only divisive, but also places in jeopardy the secular spaces which BME women, in particular, have created away from male religious control.

It is in this way that the Government's counter-terrorism agenda is continuing the ongoing shift from 'multi-culturalism to multi-faithism'. As Pragna Patel has noted:

the pressure to characterise communities primarily through the prism of religion has compounded a problematic assumption at the heart of multi-faithism: that minorities are both easily defined and homogenous. Characterising minorities (and, indeed, the majority) according to 'faith', confines identity ... Multi-faithism has led to the emergence of the most reactionary, patriarchal and conservative, if not fundamentalist religious identity politics and has entrenched the power of so called religious leaders, who seek to monopolise local resources and constituents (2016: 41-2).

This approach will continue to have negative consequences for women and women's organisations struggling under the weight of austerity to keep women and children safe from violence and abuse, but also undermines the hope for integrated and cohesive communities, something which the Government claims to want to support. The evidence from women's organisations highlight the critical need for further discussion of the gendered and racialised nature of counter-terrorism approaches. Muslim women deserve more than being the 'pawns' in police attempts at counter radicalisation. Whole community approaches are needed that involve extensive, wide ranging partnerships across sectors and across all communities. If a truly equal world is the objective, then, we must be prepared to challenge not simply those in

power but our norms, behaviours, and crucially our beliefs – including religious belief. This is not to deny believers their right to freedom of religion, but to ensure that religion can no longer be politicised and instrumentalised as a weapon of control.

**Yasmin Rehman** is a feminist, human rights activist, and researcher. She is currently working as a freelance consultant and her recent commissions have included survivor consultations for regional government and national governments, work with a number of women’s organisations providing project and policy support, capacity building, training on equalities, diversity, and inclusion for higher education institutions, and as an independent panel member reviewing past Serious Case Reviews. Yasmin has also acted as an expert witness in legal cases providing expert reports on faith-based abuse and Polygamy. Yasmin is undertaking research examining threats to secular and women human rights defenders in the UK and has submitted evidence to several Government committees. Yasmin has worked for more than 30 years predominantly on violence against women, race, faith and gender, and human rights. She co-edited a book *Moving in the Shadows* (2013), which examines violence experienced by minority women and girls in the UK. She is presently working on a second book looking at polygamous and temporary marriage, and its links to violence and abuse of women and girls. Yasmin is currently a Board member of the Centre for Women’s Justice, a member of the One Law for All Coalition, a Fellow of the Muslim Institute, and member of the Cross-Government Working Group on Hate Crimes. She is a former Board member of EAW (End Violence against Women Coalition). Yasmin was awarded the Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year 2017.

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