# Victims, Perpetrators or Protectors: The Role of Women in Countering Terrorism

**Hifsa Haroon-Iqbal**

*Correspondence: Hifsa.Haroon-Iqbal@education.gov.uk

I remember seeing a film as a child called *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* and falling in love with Ingrid Bergman's character – a strong, independent woman by the name of Gladys Aylwood. Gladys took no prisoners. She was a force to be reckoned with, coming from a society in which women were regarded as second-class citizens – to be seen and not heard – to another society, millions of miles away from her creature comforts. She was a woman with a mission, a woman of extraordinary strength and abilities. She became my first female hero – a woman who shepherded 100 children to safety before the Japanese invasion, despite all the obstacles placed in front of her. She was a remarkable woman and I wanted to be her. A few years later, my next female 'obsession' became Emmeline Pankhurst – political activist, leader of the Suffragette movement who, despite all the barriers placed in front of her and the Suffragettes, achieved the vote for women. The first major step in women being recognised as 'equal citizens' in Britain, a mere one hundred years ago this year. Okay, they might have been a bit militant, but had it not been for their bravery, their sheer guts, who knows how long it would have been before women were recognised as being equal partners in society in every walk of life. I suppose seeing women such as Gladys and Emmeline as role models might explain to some extent why I've always been a bit of a rebel, doing what I felt was justified, regardless of how 'the community' might view things. Many years later, I was told by a woman that her husband had told her I was responsible for 'ruining' the Muslim women in our community!

© Copyright: The Authors. This article is issued under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike License, which permits use and redistribution of the work provided that the original author and source are credited, the work is not used for commercial purposes and that any derivative works are made available under the same license terms.

I grew up in a typical Muslim household, with parents who were first generation immigrants and five older siblings. As the youngest in the family, I was (and to some extent, despite being 50+ still am!) regarded as the family baby. Like most first-generation families, my parents had the same worries and fears for their children moving to Britain in the late sixties as everyone else. A fear of us becoming too westernised, losing our religion, our cultural norms or connection with our motherlands. My parents saw England as a short-term 'stop over', allowing the children to get an English education before going 'back home'. When I was in my early twenties, I remember asking my father why we had never returned to Pakistan. He replied that he wanted his daughters to be afforded the same opportunities that his sons had been given. The chance of a good education and job prospects. He was a strict man, but as my sisters to this day remind me: 'I could get away with murder'. I wore jeans, went to town on my own, learned to drive and had my own car (before I was married), which gave me freedoms many young Asian women of my generation didn't have. Many of my peers were married at 16, as soon as they finished their 'O' levels. Many were married off to men they'd never even met. When my husband asked me to marry him, my father made it crystal clear that as long as he lived, no one would ever force me to marry against my will. He completely supported my ambitions when I joined a political party, became a shop steward for my union, and became politically active (much to the annoyance of one of my brothers who ended up ferrying me around, as I hadn't passed my driving test at this point). I have been active since. For over 30 years, I have been involved in a wide range of causes locally, regionally, and nationally, designed to improve the quality of life for vulnerable groups and individuals, and to build bridges between communities. I have been involved in supporting prisoners, cancer patients, patients with genetic disorders, women in refuge hostels, refugee settlement programmes, hate crime partnerships, children and families with poor social support

networks, and minority ethnic groups. Whether that has been through supporting women's activism in the community, inter-faith dialogue, anti-racism engagement, or raising funds for charity. Moving into the arena of challenging radicalisation was actually not something I had ever considered as a career move. I was familiar with the Prevent strategy when it was first introduced by the Labour government in 2003, but it was not something I had considered being involved in at the time as I was in the process of completing my Masters in Philosophy. It was, however, something I became more familiar with over the next few years.

My first active involvement with Prevent goes back to 2007, when I was encouraged to apply for and was appointed to the Staffordshire Police Authority as an Independent Member. Prior to 2013 and the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners, Police Authorities were the public body that oversaw the work of the local police forces. These bodies were made up of representatives from the local authority and independent members who would sit on the various strategic oversight boards. As a member of the strategic Counter Terrorism Board, I gained a valuable insight into the government's Counter Terrorism strategy, called CONTEST. At the time, I was also working within higher education and was very familiar with the fervent opinions expressed within the sector about Prevent. Newspaper headlines of universities being 'hotbeds of radicalisation' went some way towards positioning a barrier between the sector and community engagement. It was felt that the strategy was seen as targeting Muslim students and staff on campus, that there was an expectation that if anyone saw or heard anything untoward or suspicious around Muslims, they would inform the security services. It became very much seen as the tool for spying on and criminalising Muslims, and many institutions refused to engage with the strategy. What didn't help matters was that at the time, engagement was only through Prevent police officers and Special Branch. As a Muslim, I didn't work in Prevent

at the time, as I believed that Prevent was heavily focusing on Muslim communities and the funding that was being made available for 'community engagement' was purely a way to sugarcoat the bitter pill Muslim communities had to swallow. It was only after I became entangled in the arrest of four Muslim students that I experienced personally the effect the counter-terrorism world was having, not just on Muslims but on wider society, as people were becoming suspicious of the very same people who had for many years been their friends, neighbours, and colleagues.

I started working on Prevent in 2013, two years after the coalition government conducted a review that recognised that the Prevent strategy needed to address all forms of violent extremism and terrorism. A much-needed shift, considering that the country had faced (and still faces) a threat from the IRA, issues around animal rights extremism, and a growing tide of far-right extremism. National Action became the first neo-Nazi group to be proscribed under terror laws by the Home Secretary in December 2016 (Home Office, 2016) and in September 2017 two further groups, Scottish Dawn and NS131 (National Socialist Anti-Capitalist Action) were also banned (Home Office, 2017). This was a very welcome decision by Amber Rudd, the then Home Secretary, who described National Action as being 'a vile racist, homophobic and anti-Semitic group which glorifies violence and stirs up hatred while promoting their poisonous ideology' (ibid). She made it very clear that any group who spread a nasty malicious ideology, that spread division, threatened the safety of citizens would not be tolerated. Making it clear that the counter-terrorism strategy was about all forms of terrorism, not just that related to Islamist groups.

However, despite this shift, a minority of Muslim groups and individuals, albeit very vocal ones, continue to propagate a false interpretation of Prevent as only targeting Muslims. This vocal ensemble has manufactured a situation in which those Muslims who are involved in any counter-terrorism work are maligned, criticised and abused, verbally and physically, in person and in the virtual world. This has become the norm. And the largest group under fire are the women activists. Not only are they targeted because they are female but because of a 'triple-jeopardy'; they are female, Muslim, and working in counter-terrorism. If perchance they do not wear the head covering, additional abuse comes their way for not being 'proper' Muslims. Sadly, most of this viciousness comes from within Muslim communities, from those men who should be advocates not critics. Therefore, instead of focusing on how we counter narratives of extremism and terrorism, or how we can protect young people from the threat of radicalisation, the debate has been shifted to discussions about Muslim 'government stooges', 'sell-outs', 'house Muslims', 'native informants', and 'boot-lickers'.

The biggest victims of terrorism across the world are women. And the greatest threats and abuse are targeted towards those women who are trying to prevent radicalisation and terrorism.

However, there is also evidence to suggest that women are just as likely to support terrorism or even commit a terrorist offence. Since 2014, of 109 people convicted of terrorist offences, 18 (16%) were women and girls (Swann, 2017). For example, Aqsa Mahmood from Glasgow fled to Syria to join Da'esh[i] in 2013 (Fantz and Shubert, 2015). Zahra and Salma Halane, twin sisters from Manchester, in 2014 left the comfort of their home to join Da'esh, just as their brother had previously done (*Newsbeat*, 2015). The same year, Amal El-Wahabi, a mother of two from

north London and wife of a Da'esh fighter, became the first Briton to be convicted under terror laws of funding jihadi fighters in Syria (Casciani, 2014). In 2015, three friends from Bethnal Green fled to Syria and, that same year, three sisters from Bradford took their nine children to Syria, following in their brothers' footsteps (Shackle, 2015). More recently, Madidah Taheer, 21, was convicted of preparing an act of terrorism, 19-year-old Amber Rafiq was sentenced to 18 months in prison for disseminating terrorist publications online, and a mother and her two daughters who were part of the UK's first all-female terror cell have been found guilty of planning acts of terrorism (*Press Association*, 2017). These are just some of the women convicted in the last three years. We must not be under the illusion that this affects only men and boys. The narrative used is sadly just as attractive to women and girls.

The threat of radicalisation affects men and women. But I am particularly troubled by young women who have been (and have the potential to be) radicalised because of the way this is done. The lack of theological knowledge among young women in relation to the role of women has been manipulated, to the extent that they have been led to believe that they are second-class citizens with rights and responsibilities that are dependent on subservience to men – first, their fathers, and then, their husband.

The role and status of Muslim women is a major misrepresentation of Islam. This portrayal cannot necessarily be apportioned to the religious text, but to the way religion has for many years been taught by men – in homes, in mosques, and most recently, through virtual means via the internet. Certainly for me and for many women of South Asian backgrounds who grew up in this country, religion was taught not

through books but through word of mouth, from their mothers and grandmothers. Because of high levels of illiteracy, most women would have received their religious instruction at their mother's knee, being taught the do's and don'ts of being a good Muslim girl, daughter or wife. They will have been taught not to question the religious edicts, as to question would be to question God himself. Religion became a set of rules to be obeyed without any understanding of whether these rules were religious or cultural. The women and girls who went out to Syria in a similar way had their religious ignorance exploited and were sold a utopian image of life in an 'Islamic State' by charismatic speakers who would attract large crowds at events, have thousands of 'hits' on their YouTube videos and followers on social media. A role that would see them fulfilling their religious obligation in establishing the only true 'Islamic State' in the world, as wives of the jihadi warriors and mothers of the new generation of true Muslims. The glorified prostitution that awaited many young women was designed for nothing other than to satisfy the carnal desires of recruiters and terrorists. Their lack of scriptural understanding in relation to the role of women within Islam was manipulated to the extent that their lives and the lives of their families were destroyed by their actions. Regrettably, women such as Aqsa Mahmood from Glasgow were just as guilty of influencing and ultimately radicalising these young girls as those Islamist hate preachers.

While the situation in Syria has changed with Da'esh and its influence there diminishing, the threat of young people being radicalised remains. Women, and mothers in particular, play a vital role in safeguarding their children from all sorts of dangers in the world. From a very early age, we begin to teach our children about 'stranger danger', we teach them to never allow anyone to touch them in ways they find uncomfortable, and we teach them to scream out if they are scared. Protecting our children and preventing them from being harmed is a built-in mechanism that

comes as part of the package labelled 'motherhood'. In the 21st century, in a world of technological advancements that most of us would never even have imagined twenty-five years ago, the dangers we need to recognise and understand have changed. Women are a key component in tackling radicalisation of young people and we must never make light of their role or the dangers. Mothers are often in the best position to notice changes in their children and are not afraid to challenge them. They can build their child's resilience around cultural and religious issues, reducing the need for them to seek answers elsewhere. Mothers have a key role to play in preventing the radicalisation of their children, but in order to do this, they too need to understand the risks and the reality of their children growing up in the 21st century. The development of technology enables us to within seconds find out what's happening on the other side of the world. It enables us to make connections with strangers, develop secret relationships, and formulate views without ever physically speaking to another human being. It also allows us to live in a clandestine world. Mothers must, from a very early age, communicate with their children and understand their lives. We must not underestimate or disparage the importance of this role and how much could be achieved, if mothers received adequate support and were recognised as a vanguard in preventing radicalisation.

Sadly, as women, we are also the biggest victims of terrorism. Look at the world around us past and present. From the Syrian conflict, the Rohingya in Burma, the Bosnian genocide, and Rwanda. Look at the horrors inflicted on the Yazidi women and the kidnapping of nearly 300 young girls in Nigeria by Al-Shabaab. Women are seen as easy targets. In the west, we are viewed through a prism of victimhood, oppressed by our own and mocked by those outside. The majority of those killed and injured in the terrorist attack in Manchester at the Ariane Grande concert were young women and girls. In their annual report last year, Tell MAMA,

an organisation that monitors anti-Muslim attacks, stated that in 2016, 56% of the attacks targeting 765 victims were directed at women, women that were seen to be visibly Muslim (Tell MAMA Annual Report, 2017). Street level attacks rose by 47% that year, with the situation worsening following terrorist attacks and the Brexit referendum (*ibid*). The horrors inflicted on women tend to be brutal, intimate, and very personal. Yet despite all this, as women we are courageous, resilient, and determined. In the words of Elizabeth Cady Stanton: 'the best protection any woman can have is courage'.

**Hifsa Haroon-Iqbal** is the West Midlands Regional Prevent Lead for Further & Higher Education. Hifsa has had a career that has spanned a number of disciplines, including health, research and education. In 2012, she was appointed a Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Staffordshire and received an MBE for Services to Community Cohesion. Hifsa is a founding member of the Armed Forces Muslim Forum for the UK Ministry of Defense and a Director of the Association of British Muslims. She actively promotes a positive image of Islam, which is consistent with British values and is an outspoken advocate for British Muslims. Hifsa is regularly called to give interviews on regional and national media and has written for a number of mainstream newspapers. She has also written a number of academic articles and published papers on palliative care for minority groups and nursing assessment processes. She has been active at grassroots social engagement and supporting vulnerable groups for several decades. She has spoken at many regional and national conferences on inter faith related topics, Islam and Women, Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations and radicalisation and counter terrorism. She is currently delivering the Government's Prevent strategy in colleges and universities across the West Midlands region and is a Trustee of The Johnathan Ball and Tim Parry Foundation for Peace and Nisa-Nashim, a Muslim and Jewish women's charity that aims to bring

communities together and promote a deeper understanding of the commonalities between the faiths.

## References

BBC news (2017) Woman jailed for sharing terrorist Propaganda. 24th October. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-41736454 [Last accessed 07 February 2018].

Casciani, D. (2014) Woman jailed for funding Syria jihad, *BBC News Online,* 13th November. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-30041625 [Last accessed 19 June 2018].

Fantz, A. and Shubert, A. (2015) From Scottish Teen to ISIS Bride and Recruiter: the Aqsa Mahmood Story. *CNN,* 24th February. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/23/world/scottish-teen-isis-recruiter/index.html [Last accessed 19 June 2018].

Home Office (2016) National Action becomes first extreme right wing group to be banned in the UK. *Home Office,* 16th December. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-action-becomes-first-extreme-right-wing-group-to-be-banned-in-uk [Last accessed 19 June 2018].

Home Office (2017) Further extreme right wing groups banned in the UK. *Home Office,* 28th September. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/further-extreme-right-wing-groups-banned-in-the-uk [Last accessed 19 June 2018].

Newsbeat (2015) Teenage Twins at Centre of ISIS Social Media Recruitment, *BBC News Online,* 28th May. Available at:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/32911536/teenage-twins-at-centre-of-is-social-media-recruitment [Last accessed 19 June 2018].

Palmer, E. (2018) Mother and two daughters found guilty of All-Female ISIS London Terror Attack Plot. *Newsweek,* 6th April. Available at: http://www.newsweek.com/isis-teenager-guilty-london-terror-attack-plot-along-mother-and-sister-957162 [Last accessed 19 June 2018].

Press Association (2017) Woman convicted of helping husband prepare UK terror attack. *The Guardian,* 26th October. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/26/woman-convicted-of-helping-husband-prepare-uk-terror-attack [Last accessed 19 June 2018).

Shackle, S. (2016) The London girls lost to ISIS what became of the jihadi brides? *New Statesman,* 6th October. Available at: https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2016/10/london-girls-lost-isis-what-became-jihadi-brides [Last accessed 19 June 2018].

Swann, S. (2017) UK terror convictions rising, BBC jihadist database shows. *BBC News online*, 6th July. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40483171 [Last accessed 19 June 2018].

Tell Mama Annual Report (2017) *A Constructed Threat: Identity, Intolerance and the Impact of Anti-Muslim Hatred*. Faith Matters: London. Available at: https://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A-Constructed-Threat-Identity-Intolerance-and-the-Impact-of-Anti-Muslim-Hatred-Web.pdf

**To cite this article:**

Haroon-Iqbal, H. (2019) Victims, Perpetrators or Protectors: The Role of Women in Countering Terrorism. *Feminist Dissent,* 4, pp. 146-157. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n4.2019.305

---

[i] I have used the word Da'esh throughout as opposed to 'Islamic State' simply because in my opinion, whilst they called themselves an Islamic State, they were neither. The term Da'esh challenges their legitimacy and is one disliked by the group, as it sounds like an Arabic term meaning to trample or crush.