

Prevent: Safeguarding and the Gender Dimension

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Much has been said and written about the UK's counter-terrorism programme of which the Prevent programme is a key part. Both the state's Cohesion and Prevent strategies have been heavily criticised for creating 'suspect' communities and for placing responsibility for cohesion and integration solely on minorities, especially Muslims who are perceived to have failed to subscribe to so-called British values and to live parallel lives. We at Southall Black Sisters (SBS) share the broad thrust of these criticisms.

At the same time, we are wary of how the debate on Prevent has become so fraught and polarised that it has left little scope for drilling into the ways in which the most vulnerable in minority communities are impacted. What makes me particularly uncomfortable about the dominant critique on Prevent is the assumption that there is a repressive state apparatus on the one hand and a victim community on the other that is perpetually homogenised and perpetually demonised. This simplistic binary framework for discussing Prevent leaves no room to explore the rise of fundamentalist and extremists ideologies connected to radicalisation and terrorism that also need to be challenged, since they pose a serious threat to the rights of the most vulnerable within our communities, especially women and girls. We only need to look at the phenomenon of the 'jihadi brides' - the school girls from Tower Hamlets for instance - to see just how



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serious these threats are. One of the brides has since died and we do not know what has happened to the others: they have simply disappeared.

Misconceptions and misunderstandings

Part of the problem with the opposition rhetoric on Prevent is that much of it is given to exaggeration, misunderstandings, and misconceptions that cloud our understanding and therefore responses to Prevent. It has been pointed out that Prevent is not just about tackling terrorism (which is a criminal matter that requires specific legal measures), but also about challenging the growth of fundamentalist and extremist ideologies (of the far and religious right) which spread hatred and bigotry, and pose a significant threat to society and to the values of freedom, rights, and democracy.

Rashad Ali, from the Institute of Strategic Dialogue and a director of the counter-extremism consultancy CENTRI, says that:

The broader Prevent policy is still widely misunderstood as an exercise in intelligence gathering and criminalising Islam, which it isn't: it works in the non-criminal sphere, for a start, and tries to support vulnerable individuals at risk of radicalization...

He adds that:

Extremism as a social and ideological phenomenon is much broader. And whilst aspects may well and do fall under preventing terrorism by preventing individuals being radicalised, extremism is much more a social cohesion problem: the spread of anti-democratic ideas; the spread of anti-Semitic tropes by groups such as MEND while they promote political participation; the promotion of bigotry against

minority groups, or even anti-western sentiments, which create more issues for us as a society than just terrorism. (Ali: 2015)

To this list, I would also add the need to urgently challenge the ways in which religious fundamentalism also radiates misogyny and violent forms of masculinity. Fundamentalism creates a climate that is conducive to the perpetuation of gender-based violence and inequality, posing a serious threat to minority sub-groups and women and girls in particular.

In reality, because of the misinformation and misunderstandings surrounding Prevent, we know very little about how key issues such as safeguarding are being addressed and whether Prevent is working or not. Researchers have noted that there are large areas of real uncertainty in terms of how it is being interpreted and implemented in different spaces and localities, and its impacts on different sections of our communities.

The other Prevent story

At SBS, we have found it challenging to navigate a course that opposes both the state's violations of civil liberties carried out in the name of counter-terrorism (and anti-immigration to which it is increasingly linked), whilst at the same time raising the real dilemmas and concerns we have about safeguarding. We see on a daily basis how vulnerable women and girls are impacted directly and indirectly by the risks posed by radicalisation and fundamentalism. Their experiences are not, however, reflected in the debates on Prevent, except in instrumentalised ways by both the state and the critics of Prevent.

There is a gendered dimension to the discussion on Prevent which cannot (and must not) be reduced to just talking about women through the prism

of race or religion only - as if their experiences only count if they tend to support the 'suspect' communities analysis of Prevent. Gender- based inequality, discrimination, and violence in the context of radicalisation, violent extremism, and fundamentalism in our communities are integral to the Prevent discussion, but they are matters on which the anti- Prevent lobby, led increasingly by fundamentalists and authoritarian religious groups, tends to remain silent.

Let me give some examples of the kind of concerns and dilemmas that are thrown up in our day-to-day work:

Angelina

Angelina, a Nigerian, single parent of Christian background was referred to SBS in 2015 regarding the disappearance and possible death of her severely disabled daughter - Blessing (who was 15 at the time). Angelina was and still is a vulnerable woman who has suffered a series of multiple difficulties throughout her life, including significant domestic violence from her ex-husband, ongoing and complex mental, health, and financial difficulties, and the serious and sudden onset of her daughter's mental illness and her eventual disappearance and presumed death in April 2014.

On 24 April 2014, Blessing was abducted by her brother, Joseph, to Egypt. He had converted to Islam whilst at university in the UK and was deeply involved in a very fundamentalist practice of Islam. He had also tried to convert Blessing to Islam, even though this went against Angelina's wishes and Blessing herself lacked any real capacity to understand what was happening to her or make informed decisions. We think that Joseph believed that he could cure Blessing's mental illness by performing religious (Islamic) rituals and took Blessing to Egypt for this purpose. We believe that she died during a failed attempt at exorcism, though there is

no independent or forensic evidence of her death - her body has not been found. Due to Angelina's bravery and persistent efforts to find out what happened to her daughter, the police eventually found Joseph and he was brought back to the UK and charged with child abduction. He has just finished serving a sentence of over 3 years and 4 months (having pleaded guilty). So far, he has refused to disclose the whereabouts of Blessing to his mother or to anyone else.

Angelina remains traumatised, not only by her son's behaviour and complete lack of empathy for her predicament, but also by the many questions that are left unanswered by Blessing's disappearance, including the considerable involvement of social services and the police with both her children prior to the fateful trip to Egypt. Above all, there is a serious question to be asked as to whether or not their lack of action to safeguard Blessing contributed to Blessing's disappearance and possible death.

Angelina believes that her son was monitored by the police for a few years before his trip to Egypt in 2014. Evidence shows that her son underwent a de-radicalisation programme via the Prevent and Channel programs whilst at university, although the outcome is not clear. Angelina was not told, although she had repeatedly tried to alert the authorities to her concerns about her son's radicalisation and had made desperate attempts to stop him from going abroad. In fact, due to her efforts, he was not allowed to disembark when he sought to go to Yemen prior to his trip to Egypt.

In 2016, an internal police review and a serious case review into the matter concluded that the disappearance of Blessing and her probable death was not preventable. Although the review does point to the complete lack of multi-agency work on the part of all the services, there appears to be no

adequate consideration of Joseph's radicalisation and the risks that this posed to his disabled sister.

In both the reports, there is a complete lack of transparency in respect of the involvement of Prevent and Channel and how they linked or failed to link in with social services in safeguarding Blessing who was known to all of them. More specifically, we are concerned that:

- Angelina was never informed by any agency that consideration was given to refer Blessing to the Prevent and Channel programme in 2013, and that Joseph had actually been referred much earlier. No family member was interviewed as part of the radicalisation risk assessment that Joseph underwent, so there was no assessment of the risks that he posed to other siblings and family members, especially someone as vulnerable as Blessing;
- No links appear to have been made between concerns raised about Joseph's radicalisation at university, his influence on Blessing, his subsequent referral to the Prevent and Channel process, and the police investigation into her disappearance in April 2014;
- There was no investigation of how and why agencies 'allowed' Joseph to assume parental responsibility for Blessing at various points in her life which constantly undermined Angelina's authority. Indeed, various agencies allowed him to make decisions about Blessing. He often turned up at her school insisting that she be covered up and demanding that she be taught by female teachers only. (I have found this to be a common occurrence. The assumption that male siblings have authority over female siblings in respect of minority families is particularly disturbing.)
- Angelina has not been given a clear answer as to why, when she first reported Blessing missing, the police failed to treat the matter as a major child protection incident involving a disabled child and link it to what they knew about Joseph;

- There is nothing in either the police or social services reports that tell us what happened when Joseph underwent the Prevent and Channel programme: why he was deemed no longer to be at risk; what if any plans were put in place if he was deemed to be of risk, and perhaps most importantly, what lessons, if any, have been learnt about the way in which he was assessed. One interpretation for this failure is that state agencies were only interested in whether or not he was about to commit an imminent terror attack than assess the dangers and risks that he posed to his vulnerable sister because of his fundamentalist ideology.
- The internal review conducted by the police was only concerned with their actions following Blessing's disappearance, but makes no reference whatsoever to Joseph's background, his history of radicalisation or his referral to the Prevent and Channel programme. I find this strange, given that this was a significant feature of the case and would have had a bearing on how the police conducted their investigation into Blessing's disappearance.

The case raises profound questions of what the agencies knew and did not know, and why they failed to act to safeguard a highly vulnerable disabled girl child.

The case also highlights how, contrary to the myths surrounding Prevent, according to many Prevent leads, many of the referrals to Prevent are made not by the authorities but by ordinary families, and who are concerned about the impact of radicalisation on their children. Our experience is also echoed by a colleague who is an ESOL teacher, who has seen how the Prevent agenda is playing out in her classes. She told me that, despite the securitisation agenda of which she and her fellow teachers do not want to be a part, any more than they want to be immigration enforcement officers, nevertheless, they find themselves confronting the need to deal with safeguarding issues. She has been asked

for help by the adult women she teaches who are fearful about their children's safety and internet use, especially following the stories of the jihadi brides.

Radicalisation and Safeguarding issues for women

There are other examples I can give of our attempt to tackle safeguarding issues for women who have been caught up in violent extremism and radicalisation.

A few years ago, the probation services in London (before it was privatised) asked us to assist with its work with women who had been charged and convicted of various terrorism-related offences. We were asked to undertake support work with the women either in prison or at the point of release; to enable them to rehabilitate and to lower their risk of re-offending, and/or to undertake de-radicalisation work and tackle the wider fundamentalist ideologies that they adhered to. The first case was that of the teenager, Roshonara Choudhry, who was charged and convicted with the attempted murder of her MP, Stephen Timms, in what was seen as an extremist plot. We were asked to visit her in prison and undertake support work with the aim of long term rehabilitation. However, despite our efforts, she refused to engage with us or with the probation services. She did not recognise the British legal system and therefore refused to co-operate. This case did not therefore achieve any successful outcomes for us.

In another case, a woman had served a sentence for assisting in carrying out extremist-related activities, and probation services asked us to get involved again with the aim of long-term rehabilitation. Prior to her release, we visited her in prison and then continued to support her on

release. She was eager to engage with us as she had only been peripherally caught up in extremist-related activities, mainly because of duress from her abusive husband. She was extremely remorseful and worried for the future of her young children and herself.

What strikes me about these referrals is that the probation officers envisaged BME groups like us playing a key role in supporting such women; work which they were, at that time, also willing to fund. However, this work has depended very much on individual probation officers who have seen the need to involve women's human rights groups rather than faith-based groups which is where most Prevent funding is targeted, even though many do nothing to challenge the fundamentalist ideologies that create the conditions conducive to radicalisation and extremism in the first place. I am not entirely sure, but I believe that the lack of clear strategies and, of course, proper funding for the probation services to develop long-term working partnerships with secular BME organisations like ours may be responsible for only intermittent referrals to our services. As a result, we have lost crucial opportunities to develop this area of work properly with the probation services.

We have also seen how Prevent funding is targeted at so-called faith-based services without an examination of whether or not they have a track record in promoting human rights and, especially, gender equality. At the same time, austerity and commissioning structures have squeezed out funding for secular BME women's rights organisations that have worked tirelessly to challenge hatred and bigotry within and outside our communities and done so in ways that enhance respect for the human rights of the most vulnerable.

Homicide Review

We also find ourselves grappling with the indirect consequences of radicalisation and the safeguarding dilemmas that this throws up, again to which those who oppose Prevent have remained ignorant or silent.

Our experience shows that Prevent is also becoming a means by which fundamentalists and ultra-conservatives in minority communities seek to evade responsibility and accountability for violence against women and girls, thereby contributing to a culture of impunity for the perpetrators.

Recently, I was involved in a local homicide review concerning a highly disabled Pakistani woman, Afsana, a mother of two young children, who had been subject to years of domestic violence from her husband who eventually killed her by decapitating her. Afsana's history of violence and abuse was well known to the local mosque that she and her husband attended.

As part of the homicide review, the Chair and I persisted in obtaining a meeting with the leaders of the local mosque that was implicated in the homicide. The mosque remained cagey throughout our meeting as they tried to evade questions about their own role in failing to protect Afsana or the absence of effective policies on safeguarding vulnerable children or adults known to the mosque.

What really struck me, however, was not their lack of concern about violence against women and girls - this is an all-too-familiar response within many religious institutions in our communities - but the readiness with which they were prepared to use Prevent as an excuse to evade

institutional accountability. They stated at the outset that they did not want to engage with the review if it was part of the Prevent programme. This was their overriding concern, not the need for the protection of women and girls and the prevention of gender-based homicide or violence in the community.

In another example from elsewhere, mosque leaders refused to allow sermons purporting to address violence against women to be recorded or televised, on the grounds that Prevent surveillance was preventing them from raising awareness of gender-based violence!

Prevent has therefore added yet another layer to the difficulties that the most vulnerable women face in obtaining justice and accountability from the very organisations that are increasingly taking control over their lives as well as increasingly leading the opposition to Prevent.

I find it hugely ironic that, whilst ‘surveillance and control’ in respect of minority communities are buzzwords in the dominant critique of Prevent, the pernicious processes of internal surveillance and control, especially of women and girls or other dissenters, are swept under the carpet. Prevent has become a convenient means for such evasion.

Women in the forefront

The wider irony is this: the British State has woken up to the fact that women are key to counter-terrorism measures, but the measures adopted to recruit Muslim women in spotting and reporting potential terrorists are counter-productive. Counter-radicalisation and terrorism strategies must be located within programmes on violence against women, human rights,

and safeguarding issues if they are to be meaningful. This is not what is happening. As my colleague, Yasmin Rehman, has pointed out, the British government has given importance to the 'role of the family' and its influence in deterring crime and radicalization; at the same time, it has enacted contradictory policies that have taken away women's rights and exit options. The State has in effect negotiated away women's freedoms when faced with violence and intimidation from the very people who control and police them (Rehman: 2014).

The key question then is: how does the safeguarding framework pick up the harms to children and other-sub-groups like women and girls in particular who are also the targets of fundamentalist activity? Perhaps we could start by analysing the links between fundamentalist ideology and patriarchal control, including gender-based violence, that has an adverse impact on women and children, and other vulnerable sub-groups both directly and indirectly. As has been noted, critiques of Prevent always speak of the hurt of minority groups, but there is at the same time an almost complete silence on the serious harm to the vulnerable within the group. The cases highlighted above illustrate this failing powerfully. To take another example, I have heard anecdotally from legal circles that when suspected terrorists have been picked up by the security services or police, many have also been found to be in possession of child pornography, which is often not made public, let alone addressed. One reason could be that it is used as a bargaining chip for obtaining further information by counter-terrorist officers. The consequence of this is that the protection of children is sacrificed in pursuit of other objectives.

Secondly, we could also interrogate the way professional multi-agency partnerships within the safeguarding frameworks are formed, often involving the very fundamentalist and ultra-conservative forces that

generate harm and risk towards the more vulnerable. The inter-faith approach to social issues is particularly problematic in this respect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would make a plea to resist rehashing the orthodoxies of the Prevent discourse. We should be concerned not only with tackling all and every kind of state assault on civil liberties, but also with countering fundamentalist and extremist ideologies that create risks for vulnerable women and children, and other minorities.

As an anti-racist, anti-fundamentalist, and feminist organisation, we have tried to grapple with these issues without falling into the trap of ‘you are either with us or against us’. We are trying to navigate a course that simultaneously challenges racism, the far right, and state repression at the same time as challenging regressive forces of fundamentalism and patriarchy from within.

If we truly believe in the values of human rights as universal (not British or Western) - which I do - we cannot afford to be selective as to which rights we wish to uphold and which kinds of wrongdoing we are willing to expose. Silence is complicity in the myriad of human rights violations that occur and so we have to speak up about all of them wherever they occur.

Pragna Patel is Director of Southall Black Sisters, one of the UK’s leading anti-racist and feminist organisations. She is a trained lawyer and has been in the forefront of key cases and campaigning milestones in the history of SBS. She is also a founding member of Women Against Fundamentalism and an Editorial Collective member of *Feminist Dissent*. She has written

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