Editorial: A Polarised Debate

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We are thrilled to present this fourth issue of *Feminist Dissent.*

The focus of this Issue is the UK's counter-radicalisation programme 'Prevent'. As a number of articles in this Issue explain, this policy is part of CONTEST, the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy.

CONTEST is organised around four 'principal strands' of activity:

> PURSUE: to stop terrorist attacks
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> PREVENT: to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism
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> PROTECT: to strengthen our protection against terrorist attack
>
> PREPARE: where an attack cannot be stopped, to mitigate its impact

The 'Prevent' section developed into a policy in its own right and in the context of the emergence of a specific Counter-Extremism Strategy. Prevent is concerned with helping people 'at risk of becoming involved in terrorism', as well as disrupting the activities of those involved in 'radicalising others'. The Prevent Review and Revised Strategy (2011) led by Lord Carlile, reasserted this aim, of seeking to 'stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' (Home Office, 2011:6). However, at its core, the revised strategy proclaims a

key connection between 'British values', extremism and integration. Thus, extremism was defined as:

> Vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include within our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces. (Home Office, 2011:7)

Many readers may be wondering why we would devote a whole Issue to this particular policy. Prevent is undeniably one of the most contentious public policies of our time and the debates on it embody the tensions between acknowledging resurgent fundamentalism, its ongoing project of establishing hegemony across religious and political fields, diverse understandings of power, differential racism and the exact role of the state in tackling fundamentalist mobilisations.

In this Issue we have sought to create a space to raise concerns that have not figured in the dominant narratives about Prevent, those constructed by its supporters and its critics. The Prevent policy is having a significant impact on a whole range of areas – Further and Higher Education, Probation and Social Work, third sector organisations, women's organisations, Local Authorities, religious institutions and movements, and community based political activism. Yet the polarised nature of the debate around Prevent means that we actually know very little about how the policy is implemented within these areas, including how responses and practices are localised and how they are impacting women and other vulnerable groups. These are significant gaps in the existing literature and they are the concerns we have sought to give voice to in this Issue.

Although Prevent was formulated and activated between the 9/11 attacks in New York and the 7/7 bombings in London, Prevent's critics connect the policy with the growth of a securitised state, with the brutalising and sinister practices of the War on Terror and a growing fear of and hatred towards Muslims. On the other hand, many government partners who applaud Prevent and the government's anti-terrorism work more widely have not been as alert to the threat of a securitised state, its use of repressive immigration controls in tackling Muslim fundamentalism and the differential application of immigration concerns as these are never part of debates about tackling white supremacists or Christian fundamentalism. Many supporters of Prevent who champion its call for greater social integration are silent on the real material causes of social disintegration across a social terrain scarred by inequality in which the social safety net shrinks on a daily basis. They seem unaware of the many ways that fundamentalists are fully integrated into partnerships with the state.

Yet radicalisation is a real and serious issue. Even as victory over ISIS has been declared, Islamist attacks around the world continue, reflected in the chilling suicide bombs in Sri Lanka at packed churches on Easter Sunday which killed over 200 people and injured more than 500. Moreover, the teenage 'jihadi brides' who departed from Tower Hamlets in 2015 are only three of the estimated 850 young people who have travelled to Syria. Some have returned, others died, and others are stranded because the current government has revoked their citizenship. One of the Tower Hamlets girls, Shamima Begum, radicalised in Britain and online, has been found but the media spectacle around her has been inhumane and incredibly disturbing. The Home Secretary's decision to revoke Begum's British citizenship and leave her as a stateless young woman in a refugee camp in Syria is a shocking and sinister reminder of the 'conditional citizenship' that British minorities are subjected to as well as the incredible difficulty of pushing for a state response to

fundamentalism in a context where government reverts to punitive measures and immigration controls as its main response to social issues.

Though it's unclear at this stage, what, if any, crimes Begum has been involved in, we do believe that anyone that has committed violations and abuses of human rights has to be held responsible, legally and ethically, for their actions. We are equally alert to the appeal by Yezidi women that 'jihadi brides' were involved in preparing them for rape and sexual assault and the information that is emerging about their role in policing other women. Having said that, the pitiful situation of Shamima Begum – who at 19 years of age has seen the deaths of all of her three children - is a salutary reminder of the gender dimensions of Muslim fundamentalist mobilisations and a racialised British state. We believe the British state has a responsibility to uphold human rights no matter how abhorrent the ideologies to which its citizens subscribe. More than this, the British state has responsibility for British fundamentalists abroad and, as Kurdish fighters against ISIS forces have made clear, they are not welcome in camps where the victim-survivors of those same fundamentalist forces reside.

Moreover, we would argue the growth in despair and isolation which has developed as a consequence of a retracting welfare state is itself propitious for the growth of both religious fundamentalists *and* neo-Nazi white nationalist groups. Recent events and referral statistics would suggest that white supremacist mobilisations (commonly known as the Far Right) have gained increasing attention by Prevent teams and Channel Panels (BBC 13/12/2018). In fact, the reliance of the Prevent agenda on this notion of 'British values' needs to be further questioned in a context where the Far Right is gaining political mileage through anti-Muslim and anti-minority integration discourses and an aggressive patriotism. Moreover, the Far Right pose a significant challenge to the terms of the Prevent agenda because their politics is ultra-

patriotic and the violence they inflict on Muslims and minorities is connected with their claim that these particular groups constitute a threat to 'British values'.

Having pushed our Call for Papers in many circles for about two years and urged specific writers to contribute a piece on the Far Right, it is with deep regret that we were not able to find even a single author to write such a piece for this Special Issue. Yet there has been a step change in statutory responses that has yet to be captured as Prevent is increasingly concerned with neo-Nazi groups. After a long period on the margins of politics, these groups have returned to the streets across Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. The mass murder of 49 Muslim worshippers at mosques in Christchurch New Zealand in March 2019 shows more than ever the reach and violence of highly organised networks of white supremacists, the central role of social media in communicating their 'white genocide' conspiracy theories[i] and the way that anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim media, news and government policy discourses have created a conducive context and provided legitimacy for their Far Right vitriol.

The range of problems with Prevent have led many within academia, within human rights groups and progressive, left and anti-racist circles to adopt the view that Prevent is nothing more than a repressive form of state surveillance over Britain's Muslims driven by state racism and that Muslim fundamentalism is mainly a response to this and to British foreign policy. As is clear from the above, we are in no doubt about the differential treatment of Muslims and their subjection to 'conditional citizenship'. The state is entirely capable of racist abuses of human rights. However, we reject the simplistic narrative of opposition between a repressive surveillance state on the one hand and a demonised, misrepresented and monolithic community on the other. One of the central issues that is pursued throughout this Issue is the way this binary

construction of power closes down discussion of resurgent religious fundamentalism, particularly Muslim fundamentalism, the risks these ideologies pose and the harms they cause. Moreover, it locates power entirely in the nation-state and overlooks power relations within communities where women and girls are subjected to the hard end of fundamentalist forces and ignores the global resources and networks of power that fundamentalists wield.

We live in a time in which violent attacks on people in public spaces by fundamentalists are now a fact of life and, in this context, we thoroughly reject the idea that a concern with radicalisation is simply feeding a 'moral panic' and that the expectation of a role for the state is fanning the flames of racism and fascism. We are clear in arguing that the state has a role to play in protecting the public and this includes the protection of young people in a safeguarding context who are drawn into fundamentalism; this is discussed by a number of contributors to this issue. Moreover, in recognition that the state is not a unitary body but comprises bodies with contradictory views and practices and that government is itself spurred by contradictory tendencies, in this Issue we have tried to capture these tensions.

Many on the Left have argued that the simple solution to radicalisation is to tackle the unjust economic and military policies of Western governments. There is no question that the chaos, brutality and human rights violations which characterise Western military interventions around the world have created a fertile environment for Islamist groups to recruit and thrive. However, fundamentalism is not simply a reaction to the West; these forces are political and ideological entities with their own momentum and objectives. *Feminist Dissent* has argued from its inception that the growth of fundamentalist movements, which we see as taking place across all religions, cannot be explained simply as reactions to other forces and have insisted that

the specific will to power which fundamentalism represents be analysed on its own terms. The idea that growth of Islamism is simply a consequence of the 'oppression of Muslims' is wrong on many counts. At the very least, it is entirely unable to account for the way Islamist violence is directed first and foremost at other Muslims, particularly those who challenge or resist the brutality and abuse which utterly characterises the praxis of those movements.

It is on this tense and contradictory terrain, and precisely because the debate on how we address these issues continues to be so polarised, that we see this Issue of *Feminist Dissent* as an important way to open out the debate. This Special Issue therefore moves away from either/or arguments about Prevent. A number of the contributions do this by looking concretely at the impact this is having in different settings.

We begin with **Sukhwant Dhaliwal**'s framing piece, which emphasises the need for a human rights approach to recognising and tackling fundamentalism. Drawing on Karima Bennoune's (2008) critical articulation of the connections between Terror and Torture and her insistence on both ensuring and respecting rights, Dhaliwal discusses the five terrorist attacks that took place in England in 2017 (a scale of violence not seen in the UK since the introduction of the Prevent programme in 2005). She argues for the need to make a clear distinction between a human rights approach and responses led by nationalist and neo-liberal concerns. Since gender became such a significant feature of the discussion of the 2017 attacks, the final third of Dhaliwal's article elicits the differences between ensuring and respecting women's human rights to security and bodily autonomy on the one hand and the instrumentalization of gender for securitisation agendas or as part of individualised vulnerability and risk assessments on the other.

Although all of the concerns raised within this Special Issue are pertinent to feminist struggles, Dhaliwal's contribution is the first of five specific feminist engagements with the Prevent agenda, each highlighting the many ways that Prevent-related antagonisms are gendered and cross cut by patriarchy.

Pragna Patel's article highlights a number of points about state and civil society responses to fundamentalism by reflecting on four Southall Black Sisters cases. The first shows that the state allows other concerns to trump the safeguarding of women and girls. The second and third cases suggest that government and civil society policies have contributed to the embedding of religious identities and shines a light on the simple fact that some jihadis (women in these cases) do not want to be supported through the legal process or by a secular women's group because they object to 'man made law' (as opposed to 'God's law') and they are opposed to secularism. The ways that Prevent has also become part of the racialised and gendered relations between minorities and the British state is reflected in the final case example that suggests Prevent is being used by religious leaders in the same way that multiculturalist policy was used in the past - as a way to circumvent state or any external scrutiny into their institutions by utilising discourses of surveillance and religious sensitivity to sidestep concerns about women's and girls' safety and security. Within all of these cases, women's and girls' rights are subsumed under and trumped by other state and civil society concerns. Patel notes the difficult challenge of navigating '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'.

Though recognising that globally it is women that are on the frontline of challenging fundamentalism, **Yasmin Rehman** considers the impact of the Prevent agenda on the women's voluntary sector in the UK, particularly that

the state has historically denied the work of women's organisations such as *Women Against Fundamentalism* and *Women Living Under Muslim Laws* in challenging fundamentalism and yet is using Prevent funding to re-shape the character and identity of women's organisations by encouraging them to re-organise their specialist services along religious, particularly Muslim, lines. As she points out, the focus of the government's Counter Extremism Strategy has been on Muslim women and has not engaged in the same way with white women on challenging the Far Right or with Sikh or Hindu women to challenge other forms of fundamentalism within these communities. Conversely, Rehman also highlights the criticisms that women's organisations have been subjected to - of fuelling anti-Muslim racism and accusations of securitisation - if they are seen to be engaging with Prevent work let alone taking Prevent funding, even if recourse to this funding has been a consequence of their significantly reduced funding avenues in a context of austerity. Rehman concludes that Prevent policy in practice has hastened the decimation of secular spaces and enabled the state and religious organisations to infringe on spaces that were previously outside of their control.

Rehman's research demonstrates the extent of mistrust between the state and women's groups in the UK who have faced over a decade of severe funding cuts to their generic support work but with Prevent arriving have suddenly been offered additional funding for counter-radicalisation work with women. Moreover, Rehman raises an important and urgent contradiction: that this de-secularisation of provision for women actually reduces the capacity for countering fundamentalist and extremist ideologies and diminishes the ability of those groups that are actually protecting women, children and other minorities to continue doing this work.

This presents us with an important question: can working within the structure of Prevent challenge the resurgence of fundamentalism in the UK? The articles

by **Tehmina Kazi** and **Hifsa Haroon-Iqbal** make this case without being apologists or supporters of the present government. They show that Prevent funded initiatives can act as a place in which human rights and women's and children's rights are defended against fundamentalist violence. Prevent is often described as a policy which targets Muslims. Kazi and Haroon-Iqbal help us move away from monolithic understandings of Muslim communities to see different power relations within them.

Tehmina Kazi highlights the importance of critical thinking skills for feminist empowerment strategies to challenging fundamentalist recruitment. She also underlines the safeguarding duties in relation to 'jihadi brides' but when looking closer at their possible 'vulnerabilities' she questions the sense that these are poor uneducated girls. As she notes, they were high academic achievers and yet lacked critical personal development skills that would have encouraged them to doubt and dissent. These highly educated women had bought into an 'us vs them narrative' of supremacist ideologies, narratives that dehumanise certain people and groups. From Kazi's perspective, Prevent and Channel represent an opportunity for critical interventions with young women that are being exposed to these fundamentalist ideologies. She highlights the Making a Stand roadshow led by the women's organisation *Inspire*, which encouraged young women to recognise and say no to bigotry and hatred and provided opportunities for women to be exposed to other interpretations of Islam. In some ways Kazi's piece speaks back to Rehman's article that decries the way that the decimation of a secular Black and minority ethnic women's sector has undermined the women's voluntary sector's ability to do exactly this kind of work.

The fifth feminist engagement comes from **Hifsa Haroon-Iqbal,** the Prevent lead for education in her local area. This is an auto-biographical piece that allows us to see her journey in to Prevent work and its significance for her as a

vehicle to challenging fundamentalism and racism. Her personal story is intertwined with the stories of other Muslim women to demonstrate the ways that women are targeted by conservative and fundamentalist forces and by racists alike. She surmises, '(t)he 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.' As with Kazi and Rehman, she notes that women are a force for change, but she also points out that the phenomenon of 'jihadi brides' shows women can be perpetrators as well as victims of fundamentalism. She points to the role that women have played in recruiting jihadi brides and in perpetuating particular authoritarian versions of Islam. She is aggrieved to see Muslim women buying into ideologies that reduce the rights they currently have within the UK and subscribe to ideologies that demote them to the status of second-class citizens.

Both Pragna Patel and Tehmina Kazi point to the harms of fundamentalism and racism to women and children and emphasise that the state does have a duty to safeguard women and children from this. These safeguarding dimensions, and particularly the 2015 Prevent Duty and the role of social workers are the specific focus for **Stephen Cowden and Jonathan Picken's** article. They provide a detailed analysis of Salafi-Jihadism and its specific harms to children and young people. Cowden and Picken problematise the characterisation of Social Work's involvement in Prevent and Channel as a form of 'surveillance' of Muslim families and communities, pointing particularly to evidence of the extent of concern about these issues within Muslim communities. Their argument is particularly illustrated by their analysis of a Serious Case Review concerning two radicalised teenagers which they argue demonstrates the need for much greater critical understanding, particularly among social workers, of the politics and ideology of violent fundamentalism.

As with Hifsa-Haroon and Tehmina Kazi, there is considerable anecdotal information to suggest that the implementation of Prevent and Channel is hugely varied within local areas. Within this Issue, the article by **David Parker, David Chapot and Jonathan Davis,** who write here in a personal capacity, is an example of how local interpretations and implementation of Prevent is very different to its characterisation as contributing to the 'securitisation of Muslim communities'. Like Kazi and Hifsa-Haroon, they argue that Prevent funding presents an opportunity to do social welfare and support work within local communities.

However, Kazi, Hifsa-Haroon, Parker, Chapot and Davis, stand in contrast to the experiences of James Alexander and Alia Malak whose articles raise important concerns about the use and abuse of counter-terrorism powers in the application of Prevent. **Alia Malak** evidences the way that University Administrations have used Prevent as a lever to quash and silence Palestinian activism within University spaces while at the same time turning a blind eye to platforms for the Israeli Defence Force. Malak raises fundamental questions about the use of Prevent to silence dissenting voices and squeeze spaces of political dissent. If one is to resist both violent fundamentalism and neo-Nazism, spaces of dissent are crucial resources. **James Alexander** discusses case examples and anecdotal evidence from youth workers as part of his account of the way that Prevent incites heavy handed responses to young people whose needs (material, support and belonging) are completely subordinated to policing and counter-terrorism.

A number of our contributors have worked in educational settings and this material points to the centrality of pedagogical issues around Prevent. **Joan McLaughlin's** piece about her experiences of the Prevent policy in a northern English FE College demonstrate not just the utter inadequacy of training which so many front-line staff receive around Prevent but also the failure of this to

address the real situation of students and young people in these settings. She describes the way her Pakistani Muslim female students feel trapped between their horror at fundamentalist violence and the way they are regularly racially abused as 'terrorists' in their local community, hardly propitious circumstances for engaging with the Prevent policy in class.

The contribution from the **London ESOL teacher** expresses a similar frustration with the pedagogy around Prevent but her criticisms are addressed more to the left wing and anti-racist activists she works with, many of whom fail to challenge and even repeat the widely circulating conspiracy theories around Prevent, in the process denying and evading the concerns being raised by ESOL students themselves about fundamentalist mobilisations and the harms to their families including their children. This demonstrates again the inadequacy of the Left's investment in a narrative of state repression versus a victimised Muslim community. Not only does this see 'the Muslim community' as an entirely monolithic entity but it also risks colluding with the view that Muslims cannot live in the West, a view shared by racists and Islamists. She argues that ESOL teachers, who do so much to impart a sense of belonging to migrant students should do more to confront these conspiratorial claims and take seriously concerns raised about fundamentalist mobilisations.

The theme of Prevent's relationship with pedagogy continues in **Kay Sidebottom's** article which considers a case study based on a 'community philosophy enquiry' into Prevent and 'Fundamental British Values' involving trainee teachers in the North of England. She argues that the inclusion of such 'pro-social pedagogies' in teacher training programmes can equip teachers with tools to facilitate dialogue and use the Prevent Duty to create reflective spaces.

We also have great pleasure in introducing our readers to the poetry of **Dean Atta** and the artwork of **Xenofon Kavvadias**. We are proud to be including three of Dean's poems in this Issue (one with an embedded performance piece) and an interview highlighting the way his poetry acts as a vehicle for discussing complex processes of belonging and layers of discrimination. Xenofon's work also has a deep affinity with the issues raised in the articles in this Special Issue because the featured art work is concerned with the limits and boundaries of acceptability when one is trying to provoke thought and debate about violent terrorism and counter-terrorism. His work is discussed in our artists feature by **Shakila Mann**.

We hope you realise on looking at this range of contributions that there is not one view of Prevent which emerges from these pages. We believe that the articles included in this Special Issue have posed different questions and offer fresh insights on what is fast becoming a tired and predictable debate.

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[i] For a disturbing account of how far right networks orchestrated and actively 'participated' in the Christchurch Mosque massacre see Evans, R. (2019) Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre, *Bellingcat,* 15th March. https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/