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AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF PREVENT

BY JOANA COOK

BRIDGING
THEORY & PRACTICE:
COUNTERING VIOLENT
EXTREMISM

Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security

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Introduction

The UK's *Prevent* program was created to implement the government's countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy as part of the wider UK counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST). *Prevent* aims to 'stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' and is one of four strands of the CONTEST program, which has undergone three evolutions since its inception in 2003. *Prevent* has included numerous initiatives that have specifically focused on women, each of which have corresponded with the respective government's interpretation of the roles women could play in CVE work, and broader shifts in understanding the drivers of violent extremism and CT practices. Past initiatives included, for example, mosque reformation and the inclusion of 'moderate voices' (including women), and the creation of women's stakeholder groups to advise the government on prevention issues. London's Met Police also launched a program called Prevent Tragedies for mothers to prevent their children from going abroad to Syria. There was a sense throughout these programs that women's inclusion was viewed as increasingly important in CVE policies and programming, and at times a belief that bettering women's status in British society (particularly Muslim women) could practically and positively impact CVE work. Yet, some of these initiatives have proved to be highly contentious, and since 2003 have undergone numerous evolutions and transformations, with some critics even calling for the full termination of the *Prevent* program.

This paper will examine the wider UK counter-terrorism and CVE agenda, analyze three initiatives focused on women, and highlight key criticisms of these initiatives. It aims to offer a case study of how lessons learned in the UK can inform policy formulation and evaluation in other contexts where women are being engaged in CVE. To interrogate how women have been engaged in these programs this paper will consist of three parts. The first section will offer a brief background on the UK context in which CONTEST and its *Prevent* stream have evolved, highlighting key critiques. The second section will look more closely at three initiatives undertaken since 2003: empowering women's voices and mosque reform (2005); the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group (NMWAG) (2007); and the Prevent Tragedies campaign (2014). The final section will conclude with lessons that can be carried forward in both the UK context and others considering similar CVE initiatives. These relate broadly to separating community or social concerns, and counter-terror and CVE efforts; avoiding 'molding' communities; engaging with pre-existing partners and programs; and understanding women in complex terms.

The evolution of CONTEST

Since 2001, the UK has faced numerous plots or attacks from jihadist terrorists. The UK lost 67 citizens in the 9/11 attacks; has faced multiple attacks on UK interests abroad including an al-Qaeda attack on its consulate in Istanbul in 2003; saw 52 casualties in the 7/7 attack in 2005; and interrupted several significant plots in the UK and abroad including a 2006 airliner plot targeted at up to ten flights. More recently, and increasingly in relation to Daesh, the number of plots has again grown, and between 2013 and 2017 the UK interrupted at least fourteen plots and faced at least 3,000 largely British Islamic extremists in the UK.¹ In 2017 alone there have been several

¹ Ewen MacAskill and Paul Johnson, "MI5 Head: 'Increasingly Aggressive' Russia a Growing Threat to UK," *The Guardian* (2016).

significant attacks in the UK in which left 36 dead and over 356 injured.² In 2017 MI-5 noted that the biggest threat to national security is from international terrorism.³ In response to this rising threat, the UK has introduced an arguably excessive breadth of new legislation, as well as numerous programs, policies, initiatives and funding to tackle terrorism.

The UK's modern counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST, was developed in 2003 and has four strands: *Pursue*, *Prevent*, *Protect* and *Prepare*. *Pursue* aims to stop terrorist attacks through detection and investigation, while *Prevent* focuses on stopping people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. *Protect* focuses on strengthening protections against terrorist attacks, and *Prepare* aims to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack.⁴ There have been three versions of CONTEST over the years - 2003, 2009, and 2011- that have evolved alongside different threats, such as the rise of domestic threats and actors. While each revival of CONTEST has aimed to improve upon errors of the previous strategy there remain significant critiques of the *Prevent* strand in particular, even as there is a general acknowledgement that such a preventative program is required. The CONTEST strategy also evolved alongside new counter-terrorism legislation, which continued to expand police and investigatory powers, and increased the number of terrorism-related offenses in the UK. These included the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005; Terrorism Act 2006; Counter-Terrorism Act 2008; and the Terrorism and Security Act 2015, among others.

Key UK government counter-terror and security policy (2000 – 2017)

- 2000: Terrorism Act 2000
- 2001: Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001
- 2003: Contest 1
- 2003: Criminal Justice Act
- 2005: The Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005
- 2006: Terrorism Act 2006
 - UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (version 1)
- 2008: Counter-Terrorism Act 2008
 - The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom (first)
- 2009: Contest 2
- 2010: The National Security Strategy 2010
 - UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (version 2)
- 2010: The Strategic Defence and Security Review
- 2011: Contest 3
- 2014: Immigration Act 2014
- 2014: National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (version 3)
- 2015: Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015
- 2015: National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review

² These were both Islamic-inspired and right wing. These figures account for the Westminster (March 22: 6 dead, 50 injured), Manchester (May 22: 23 dead, 250 injured), London Bridge (June 3: 7 dead, 48 injured), and Finsbury Park (June 19: 0 dead, eight injured) incidents. See: Ashley Kirk, "How Many People Are Killed by Terrorist Attacks in the UK?," *The Telegraph* 2017.

³ MI-5, "What Are the Biggest Current Threats to National Security?," <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/faq>.

⁴ HM Government, "2010 to 2015 Government Policy: Counter-Terrorism," (2015).

CONTEST 1 was developed in 2003 and released in 2006 as the UK's first cohesive strategy for addressing international terrorism. It focused specifically on reducing the risk from international threats⁵ and coincided with numerous structural changes, such as the establishment of the inter-agency Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC). CONTEST 1 significantly increased funding to security and intelligence services and the police, doubling annual spending prior to 9/11.⁶ The government's deradicalization program Channel was also first piloted in 2007.

CONTEST 2 was released in 2009 and informed by significant problems that arose from CONTEST 1, as well as the 7/7 attacks, which were perpetrated by British citizens, and growing concerns of 'home-grown' threats. New offences related to the preparation of terrorist acts, receiving training for terrorist purposes, attending a place used for terrorist training and encouraging terrorism or disseminating terrorist publications were introduced. There was also the introduction of non-prosecution actions such as control orders; exclusion of foreign nationals from entering the UK; revocation of citizenship for dual citizens; and deportation. The Prevent stream under CONTEST 2 highlighted the support of 'mainstream voices' and assistance for individuals vulnerable to recruitment.⁷

CONTEST 3 was released in 2011 and attempted to address the root causes of radicalization, including tackling extremism more broadly (both violent and non-violent). It also emphasized integration, to establish a "stronger sense of common ground and shared [British] values" amongst all British citizens and enable "participation and the empowerment of all communities" and provide social mobility.⁸ It aimed to work with a wider range of sectors, including education, faith and health stakeholders in counter-radicalisation work. CONTEST 3 also saw the separation of funding for integration projects under the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) from security and counter-terrorism focused projects, a result of policy failings discussed in programing below.

In the UK counter-terrorism measures broadly, and *Prevent* efforts specifically, have faced significant criticism for focusing predominantly on the Muslim community. For example, some key critiques of counter-terror practice up to 2011 were around the rise of stop and search powers under counter-terror laws, particularly amongst Black, Asian, minority and ethnic (BAME) communities, which Assistant Chief Constable Jawaid Akhtar QPM noted were disproportionate to the threat. The length of time an individual could be held without charge reached a peak of 28 days in 2006 Terrorism Act,⁹ and was seen by some as a breach of fundamental democratic rights and freedoms (including contravening the European Convention on Human Rights), and lacked sufficient scrutiny and oversight.¹⁰ Control Orders, and revocation of citizenship of British dual citizens, again drew significant criticism.

Government initiatives up to 2009 often conflated social cohesion and CVE work, which negatively impacted community cohesion and reduced the effectiveness of *Prevent*. For example,

⁵ "Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom's Strategy " (UK2006).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ "Pursue Prevent Protect Prepare: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism," (2009).

⁸ Theresa May, "Contest 3: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism," ed. HM Government (2011).

⁹ Some proponents of pre-charge detention wanted to increase this to 90 days, but this was rejected. See: Home Affairs Committee, "The Government's Counter-Terrorism Proposals. First Report of Session 2007-08," ed. House of Commons (UK2007).

¹⁰ The Law Library of Congress, "Pre-Charge Detention for Terrorist Suspects: United Kingdom," <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/uk-pre-charge-detention.php>.

Secretary of State for Communities, Hazel Blears, highlighted the growing problem of “oversensitivity” to the role of religion in British life that allowed practices such as FGM and forced marriage to continue. While such practices may have been problematic in the UK, this was explicitly discussed under the umbrella of ‘extremist political positions,’ conflated with violent extremism, and specifically the Muslim community.¹¹ Previously, such work was addressed instead through the Department of Health, or the Inter-Ministerial Group for Domestic Violence, or approached as a criminal justice issue.

Government efforts to address ideology, partner with communities, and address grievances faced mixed and often negative reviews. Thomas critiqued the government’s “monocultural and large-scale focus on essentialised Muslims and their reified faith identity” through *Prevent*, while reducing resources for other ethnic, faith and social communities. Huddersfield noted *Prevent* was securitizing the British state’s relationship with Muslim communities at local and national levels, and making it appear that the government was conducting “large-scale surveillance” of the community, actually reducing human intelligence the Muslim community would be willing to share with authorities.¹² Under CONTEST 2, there was also an increased focus on *Prevent* where key objectives included challenging the ideology behind violent extremism; supporting mainstream voices; supporting individuals vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremists; increase community resilience to violent extremism; and addressing grievances ideologues are exploiting. However, government efforts to address ideology, partner with communities, and address grievances faced mixed and often negative reviews. CONTEST 3 faced particular criticism for disregarding the grievances of the Muslim community,¹³ and viewing ‘extremist but non-violent ideologies’ and ‘terrorism’ as one and the same.”¹⁴ A CVE focus on universities raised “fundamental challenges to notions of academic freedom,”¹⁵ specifically through monitoring student activity and behavior.¹⁶ Under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 it became obligatory as ‘*Prevent Duty*’ for specified authorities- such as local government, criminal justice, education and child care, health and social care, and police- to watch for and report ‘extremism.’

With every new and expanding version of CONTEST, particularly the *Prevent* stream, a new set of challenges and critiques has emerged. It is within this context that three CVE programs focused on women’s engagement will be examined.

Women and CVE programming

This section will examine three initiatives that were linked to *Prevent* and other CVE efforts, which had a dominant focus on women. These include community groups which focused on

¹¹ Hazel Blears, "Many Voices: Understanding the Debate About Preventing Violent Extremism," in *Lecture at the London School of Economics (LSE)* (London, UK2009).

¹² Paul Thomas, "Britain's Prevent Programme. An End in Sight?," *Critical Perspectives on Counter Terrorism. Routledge Critical Terrorism Studies*, ed. Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 182.

¹³ Asim Qureshi, "Prevent: Creating “Radicals” to Strengthen Anti-Muslim Narratives," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no. 1 (2015).

¹⁴ Anthony Richards, "From Terrorism to ‘Radicalization’to ‘Extremism’: Counterterrorism Imperative or Loss of Focus?," *International Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2015).

¹⁵ Thomas, 182.

¹⁶ *Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism: Failing to Prevent.* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

Muslim women and mosque empowerment (2005); the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group (NMWAG) (2007); and "Prevent Tragedies" (2014).

Engaging with Muslim women and mosque empowerment (2005)

In 2005, following the 7/7 attacks, the UK government launched seven community working groups with the aim of "Working Together to Prevent Extremism." This initiative sought government engagement and consultation with local communities on policies it developed in response to extremism and terrorism. Two of these groups had a specific and unique emphasis on women. The first working group was entitled "Engaging with Muslim Women," which made recommendations, for example, to deepen relationships between government institutions and women through the establishment of mentoring schemes, and to address discrimination of Muslim women in the workplace and in society more generally. There was a sense from both government and community actors that Muslim women disproportionately faced several disadvantages in areas such as employment,¹⁷ were underrepresented in top positions in the public and private sector, and as such not able to fully participate in public life.¹⁸ A third recommendation of this working group was to build a national campaign and coalition to increase the visibility of Muslim women, empowering them to become informed and active citizens in civic, public and religious life. This was demonstrated in a national program entitled the "Muslim Women Talk Campaign" (MWTCC) which was to act as a conduit between Muslim women and the government to discuss issues such as community cohesion, national security, and shared concerns.¹⁹ A fourth included consolidating "good work" that was already happening, including government offices working with Muslim women's organizations to provide information on women's sexual health, amongst others. There was an inherent assumption that by empowering Muslim women in diverse areas of private and public life as described above, they could better contribute to CVE efforts in their communities.

The second key working group that highlighted women was "Imam training and accreditation and the role of mosques as a resource for the whole community." One aim of this working group was to encourage the participation of women and youth in mosque structures through a new Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board, and otherwise emphasize inclusiveness of women in mosques.²⁰ The group acknowledged a necessary increase in both education and awareness amongst mosque committees and Imams about the necessity of providing space and facilities for women.²¹ In this same period, mosques were facing increased scrutiny as some were perceived to be linked to extremist preachers, clerics and teachers.²² These included for example, Egyptian-born Abu Hamza, the radical Imam of London's Finsbury Park mosque, which was linked to a number of prominent terrorist suspects,²³ and numerous Islamist organizations active in the UK such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun.²⁴ Hamza was later jailed, and both

¹⁷ Home Affairs Committee, "Terrorism and Community Relations. Sixth Report of Session 2004-05," ed. House of Commons (UK 2005), 25.

¹⁸ HM Government, "Preventing Extremism Together' Working Groups," (2005), 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), "Voices from the Minarets: MCB Study of UK Imams and Mosques," (London, UK 2006), 18.

²² Home Office, "Preventing Extremism Together: Places of Worship," (HM Government 2005), 2.

²³ Neville Dean and Nick Allen, "Finsbury Park Mosque's Terrorist Roll Call," *The Independent*, 7 February 2006. BBC News, "Mosque's Terror Connections," *BBC*, 8 February 2006.

²⁴ More background on these groups in the UK is available at: Raffaello Pantucci, *"We Love Death as You Love Life": Britain's Suburban Terrorists* (London, UK: Hurst, 2015); Sadek Hamid, "Islamic Political Radicalism in Britain: The Case of Hizb-Ut-Tahrir," in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective*, ed. Tahir Abbas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). Chapter 1 of Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, "Choosing Our Friends Wisely," *Policy Exchange* (2009).

extremist organizations banned. Such cases were disputed by the Muslim Council of Britain as an exception rather than the rule.²⁵

What were some of the key critiques of this program?

While the aims of these initiatives appeared well intentioned, significant concerns arose from grouping general women's empowerment projects under a CVE umbrella. Engaging with and empowering Muslim women now received increased focus, though through a CVE lens, and such efforts were poised to be securitized. There was also a risk that community groups would have to frame their (often social or community) concerns in CVE terms in order to access increased government funding and support. There was no measureable link between areas such as women's empowerment or roles in business and CVE, and work which may have been addressed less controversially through other departments now became associated with a wider counter-terror and CVE agenda.

Brown noted that a focus on women in mosques acted as a measurement to assess how integrated Muslim communities were, and therefore how susceptible they may be to extremism, showing limited understanding of the causes of terrorism as related to ideology and other factors. As government campaigns became increasingly linked to integration and counter-radicalisation, they lost credibility and authenticity in Muslim communities.²⁶ In terms of reach into the religious sphere, the government appeared to be trying to mold a specific, diverse religious community. As Brown observed, "the government has firmly intruded into the space of mosque reform and the debate on women's participation in the name of counter-terrorism and in a way not envisaged for other religious groups."²⁷ Allen and Guru also highlighted problems with this:

"Whilst the challenges facing women in relation to mosques and mosque regimes were not unique to Britain, by presenting them as politicised and problematised spaces that excluded women at the same time as allowing radicalism, so government was able to find resonance between specific community issues and wider governmental policies: to rationalise and justify intervention."²⁸

Mosque reform, where women now became a focus, was viewed as unfairly focusing on the Muslim community; a route for the government to attempt to mold the Muslim community; and seemingly driven by concerns for terrorism more broadly, not sincere concerns for women's status, which was instead drawn on to increase support for these efforts.

Government policies that saw women's participation as a cure for "the insecurity of the mosque" relied on assumptions that women were generally 'mainstream' in their religious views, and could perform educative and supportive roles in the family. This impacted the "discursive framework in which women's rights and political activism is envisaged" as it was done in limited spaces proscribed or envisioned by the government.²⁹ By focusing on religious authorities and identities, policies may not have considered women outside of formal religious

²⁵ The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), 9.

²⁶ Katherine Brown, "The Promise and Perils of Women's Participation in UK Mosques: The Impact of Securitisation Agendas on Identity, Gender and Community," *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 10, no. 3 (2008): 486.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Allen and Guru.

²⁹ Brown, 481-82.

institutions. It was Muslim women in the mosque context alone, versus the wider, diverse Muslim population, who the government viewed as those “who should have a say in community matters,” thus limiting the “basis, scope and criteria” for broader engagement of women.³⁰ Support for the campaign “ultimately appear[ed] to have become about government needs to reassure the general public about security and not about Muslim women or their rights.” As Brown scathingly stated, “the instrumental use of gender by government has had the impact of relegating Muslim women’s political activism to a sideshow.”³¹ The government was both proscribing and limiting the means and terms in which women were being engaged in CVE efforts.

National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group (2007)

In 2007, the Labour Government as part of their *Prevent* agenda established the National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group (NMWAG) – an independent, informal group set up as part of a grassroots counter-terrorism strategy.³² This initiative was established by then-Secretary Blairs, under the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). NMWAG was made up of 19 women who were in positions of leadership or who work with Muslim communities in Britain.³³ The stated purpose of the NMWAG was to advise on a number of issues including “empowerment and participation in civic, economic and social life” and to “provide advice to local partners on engaging with Muslim women at a local level.”³⁴ This was based on the idea that Muslim women represented a moderate “silent majority” where “all too often the voices of Muslim women go unheard.” For example, DCLG stated, “The Government believes that we need to do more to help the voices of moderation in our communities be heard and listened to. This group will help to encourage more women to engage with individuals at risk of being targeted by violent extremists.”³⁵

Women’s role in the family was particularly highlighted: “Muslim women often have a unique moral authority at the heart of families to influence and challenge the false and perverted ideology spread by extremists and give our young people the skills and knowledge to turn their backs on hate.”³⁶ Some of the specific activities of the group included community leadership training courses; mentoring programs run by the business community; community-led programs; and local projects that promoted opportunities for women and young Muslims to play a greater role in civic life. It specifically noted these activities “help promote equality and the skills that strengthen communities’ resilience to extremism.”³⁷ Officials from NMWAG had hoped that “greater support for a ‘silent majority’ of women, including mentoring leaders, will help prevent terrorism by leaving them better placed to identify and block extremists radicalising young Muslims.”³⁸ NMWAG was active until May 2010.

One of the NMWAG activities that promoted women included the role model road show entitled

³⁰ Naaz Rashid, *Veiled Threats: Producing the Muslim Woman in Public Policy Discourses* (Great Britain: Policy Press, 2016), 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 486 - 87.

³² Communities and Local Government, “Muslim Women to Advise Government on Preventing Violent Extremism,” ed. HM Government (London, UK2007).

³³ HM Government, “Delivering the Prevent Strategy: An Updated Guide for Local Partners,” ed. Home Office (UK2009), 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Communities and Local Government.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Dominic Casciani, “Muslim Women Advise on Extremism,” *BBC News* 2007.

‘Our Choices’ which saw 625 students from 26 schools and colleges attend in six locations across England. Seventy Muslim women role models (12 who traveled nationally, and 58 who were local) presented at these events from diverse jobs and professions, specifically non-traditional jobs, or jobs that were ‘unusual for Muslim women’.³⁹ Role models had to meet a number of requirements including being “willing to mentor young girls” and being “opposed to violent extremism.”⁴⁰ The program received positive support for “the project’s aim of raising the aspirations of the next generation of Muslim women.”⁴¹ Another activity sent women to leadership training courses designed for FTSE 100 managers to boost skills and confidence to better challenge violent extremism and so-called ‘fanatics.’ Women were offered work placements with business leaders and top athletes to help develop these skills.⁴² Women in this sense were viewed as positively influencing CVE by gaining skills in business and leadership. There was a seeming belief that indirectly, women’s empowerment in the Muslim community more generally would help allow them to stifle extremism in the long-term.

What were some of the key critiques of this program?

There were several critiques aimed at NMWAG, many from its own members. These revolved around the initial choice of membership; accusations of government engagement of women to ‘spy’ on their communities; a gap between government resources and group aims; and a general lack of access to decision-making bodies and impact on policy and practice.

The membership of NMWAG was based on a snowball referral process and consisted largely of middle class women who had already worked with the government on other projects. For example, some initial members had previously been either *Prevent* consultants or had received *Prevent* funding. NMWAG member Gohir noted, “We were handpicked by civil servants and government advisors which resulted in a lack of diversity and raised questions about our credibility.”⁴³ As such, it was not viewed as representative of the wider population, but towards Muslim women who may be more predisposed to *Prevent* aims. The Muslim Council of Britain accused the government of first engaging imams to spy on their community, and now reaching out to women to do the same.⁴⁴ Indeed, the program was viewed by Allen and Guru as creating “a space in which Muslim women were nurtured to act as the mouthpiece of government by appealing to a secular and a human rights agenda with clear anti-terrorist sentiments.” However, “it was rarely a space where the ‘true’ voice of Muslim women could be heard.”⁴⁵

The key assumption behind this initiative – that British Muslim women were a ‘silent majority’ that was largely oppressed and inactive in society - also received criticism. It seemingly overlooked activities that women had been active in before NMWAG, setting up NGO’s such as the Muslim Women’s Network or the An-Nisa Society.⁴⁶ There was also a long history of Black and Asian women (many of whom were also Muslim) organizing as workers, engaging in lobbying, advocacy, and promoting civil and legal rights. Allen noted that one key aspect of this

³⁹ Helen Wallaston, “‘Our Choices’ New Careers for Muslim Women. Evaluation of Role Models Roadshow, 2009-10,” (UK: NMWAG, 2010).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴² Maria Woolf, “Muslim Women to Curb Terror,” *The Times*, January 6 2008.

⁴³ Shaista Gohir, “Open Letter - Resignation from the Government's National Muslim Women's Advisory Group,” news release, 2010, <http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/news.php?id=58>.

⁴⁴ Woolf.

⁴⁵ Allen and Guru.

⁴⁶ Rashid, 82.

work was the need to stay independent of state control and instead follow a community self-help model.⁴⁷ Engaging women in NMWAG overlooked the important work that women of ethnic minority and Muslim backgrounds had already done in their communities through established community groups. Instead it engaged a top-down, government-driven approach under a counter-extremism framework, as opposed to recognizing and engaging pre-existing efforts, or partnering with established community groups. NMWAG also reinforced assumptions that Muslim women were moderators in society, had specific roles emphasized in family life (versus public), and demonstrated perceived government stereotypes of Muslim women.

The most public damnation of NMWAG came from member Shaista Gohir, who resigned from NMWAG in 2010. In an open letter to MP John Denham, Secretary of State for DLGC, she emphasized the unhelpful link of women's empowerment projects to the *Prevent* program. Noting that Muslim women are already one of the most deprived groups in the UK:

“Despite initial reservations about linking Muslim women to the *Prevent* agenda, I supported it in the expectation that it could act as a catalyst to empower women attempting to tackle the many wider issues that impact their daily lives. Having been on the NMWAG for over two years, I now feel the initiative was a political fad.”⁴⁸

Specific grievances cited by Gohir included the inactivity of the group in influencing policies on Muslim women; receiving little or no support when concerns were raised including a lack of basic website; and a lack of strategy to channel views of Muslim women to the government. Furthermore, such good work as done by the road show had been undermined by “some of the decision making processes that are quite disempowering for Muslim women.”⁴⁹ The Muslim Women's Network also noted that “Muslim women are being used by the government” who had overlooked other pre-existing organizations through which this work could have been done:

“The National Muslim Women's Advisory Group was set up almost two years ago. At the time, this appeared to be a good idea as Muslim women's voices are often not heard by policy makers. In the last two years the women have had little opportunity to influence policy. Instead the women have been involved in developing and overseeing the delivery of three projects. However, this task could have been carried out by the myriad of the already existing women's groups. The government has missed a real opportunity to involve Muslim women in decision making processes—something that even the Muslim communities are not doing.”⁵⁰

They recommended their organization be given more chance to influence policy, and that women's empowerment policies and initiatives be distinct and separate from *Prevent*. In short, NMWAG had conflated social concerns with a CVE agenda, overlooked existing community actors and efforts, and appeared to lack the sincerity and resources to fulfill its aims to empower Muslim women.

⁴⁷ Allen and Guru, 3.2.

⁴⁸ Gohir.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Communities and Local Government Committee, "Preventing Violent Extremism: Sixth Report of Session 2009 – 2010," ed. House of Commons (London, UK2010), Ev. 130.

Prevent Tragedies (2014)

After the conflict in Syria erupted in 2011, countries around the world, including the UK, had to grapple with the increasing number of citizens travelling abroad. Many individuals who initially travelled to Syria went to fight against Assad in various rebel and extremist-linked organizations, or provide humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians, while others traveled to join the newly established so-called Islamic State.⁵¹ In April 2014, the Met Police partnered with regional counter-terrorism units to establish an initiative entitled ‘Prevent Tragedies,’ specifically targeted at women in the Muslim community. Though this was not a *Prevent* initiative, it reflected similar aims of stopping the radicalization of individuals, and highlights how women were being engaged by UK security services in these efforts.

‘Prevent Tragedies’ engaged women to deter their children from traveling to Syria. The program was stated to be a “proactive measure to keep families together” aiming to help “idealistic young people not would-be terrorists” who, if they travelled to Syria even for humanitarian reasons “risk being preyed on by terrorist groups.” The initiative claimed, “we are trying to protect them” and specifically stated they are “encouraging women to take an active part in their child’s lives.”⁵² Activities of this campaign included radio campaigns, a webchat Q & A with Counter-Terrorism Senior National Coordinator (SNC) Helen Ball, and an informational website with supporting documents and information. The initiative publically partnered with several NGO’s who emphasized women in programing including Jan Trust, Inspire and FAST who were engaged from the onset of the program, and advised on its formation. As the ‘Prevent Tragedies’ initiative continued, there was also an increased focus on preventing women from traveling to Syria, as had been increasingly occurring.⁵³ The website featured stories of mothers who had fled Syria who addressed young women in the UK and advised them not to travel to Syria, and a radio campaign urged mothers to talk to their daughters about traveling to Syria, and provided resources and travel warnings.

The initiative raised several issues which were unique to Daesh:

“We reject the degrading treatment of women by terrorist organisations. We seek to prevent the tragedies caused by it. We declare that women and girls should not be subject to forced or bogus marriage, rape, held in slavery, denied education or encouraged to put themselves and their children in danger. Men and women who do these things to others are to be condemned. We resolve to work together and would like to invite others who want to work with us to join us to end the malign influence and abuse that diminishes the potential and lives of women.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Daesh did not publically announce its ‘caliphate’ until June 2014 where its ‘caliph’ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared this from Mosul, Iraq. Following this, increasing numbers of men and women travelled to Syria to specifically join this organization viewed by some as a ‘state’ or state-building project.

⁵² The Metropolitan Police, "Preventing Tragedies: Starting the Conversation on Syria," news release, 24 April 2014, 2014, <http://www.met.police.uk/Syria/>.

⁵³ By March 2015, UK authorities confirmed 60 women and girls from the UK had gone abroad, of which at least 18 were under the age of 20. By 2017 this number was over 100. 850 British citizens total traveled to Syria by early 2017. Paul Peachey, "60 Young British Women Have Left to Become Jihadi Brides," *The Independent*, March 1 2015. Patrick Wintour, "Islamic State Fighters Returning to UK 'Pose Huge Challenge'," *The Guardian* (2017). Maher, Shiraz. "What Should Happen to the Foreign Women and Children Who Joined Isis?" *The New Statesmen* (2017).

⁵⁴ UK Police, "Prevent Tragedies," <http://www.preventtragedies.co.uk/>.

Communities had a greater stake in partnering with authorities when there was a perceived and real risk their daughter would be forced to marry a Daesh fighter, or that their son may become a soldier for the ‘caliphate.’ Engaging these issues, rather than a broad government-driven narrative that the Muslim community at large was susceptible to extremism, gave the initiative a greater sense of urgency and appeared to have more support and cooperation from community and private partners. Engaging pre-existing community partners at the outset of the program to advise and inform programming should also be commended. The website also provided some resources and contacts for right-wing extremist concerns. As of 2017 this program is still ongoing.

What were some of the key critiques of this program?

As Cook argued in 2014, while it was positive that the Met Police was trying to increase the roles and engagement of women in prevention efforts (which was largely absent in police efforts previously), when focusing on their capacity in the family, the Met risked reducing women’s roles to the private sphere. This may unintentionally neglect or subvert other roles women play, for example, as teachers or community leaders who also have influence over these youths’ lives. Focusing on women alone as opposed to all family members- including fathers, husbands and brothers who also have a critical stake in prevention efforts- also overlooks the impact these figures have.⁵⁵

Furthermore, there are implications for framing travel to Syria as a problem of ‘idealistic young people’ being preyed on by extremist groups. First, it suggests that men and women who travel to Syria may largely be ‘duped’ into doing so, which overlooks that many who make the decision to travel do so of their own free will. Indeed, women travel to join Daesh due to grievances or personal motivations,⁵⁶ feelings of isolation in Western culture, feelings of persecution, or frustration over the UK’s foreign policy.⁵⁷ Second, while ‘Prevent Tragedies’ highlighted the relationship between mothers and daughters, it may unintentionally undervalue the influence siblings, fathers or other important family members may have in a child’s life. Third, it failed to acknowledge that political or other grievances may be driving some to travel to Syria. By not providing or suggesting alternative outlets (for example, engaging with local MP’s, or other civic streams), the initiative left a gap in the ways women could address these grievances.

Lessons from CVE practices

Each of the initiatives above have demonstrated a different approach to engaging women in CVE, and each has drawn several critiques. Even with diverse, and at times well intentioned, government programming to empower women in their communities there are some broad lessons to be learned from these programs’ shortcomings.

⁵⁵ Joana Cook and Jill R. Russell, "Syria, Foreign Fighters and the Met’s New Campaign," <http://strifeblog.org/2014/04/25/syria-foreign-fighters-and-the-mets-new-campaign/>.

⁵⁶ Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS," (Institution for Strategic Dialogue, 2015), 10.

⁵⁷ Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2015): 9.

One clear lesson is to avoid securitization of programming when possible. As seen in the case of women's empowerment programming, such initiatives should be grounded in the good they provide to the community, not just for their perceived benefit for CVE. This is particularly the case with sensitive issues which may be disproportionately linked with a specific demographic. Forced marriage and FGM are social issues that should be addressed, but are not limited to the Muslim community, nor have they been demonstrated to impact propensity to violent extremism. If programming focused on women's concerns is tied to the threat from extremist groups, funding to these initiatives could be negatively impacted if the threat reduces. Or, programming may face blame when problems persist despite such initiatives. Furthermore, counter-terrorism and CVE initiatives have proved to be controversial in many cases. Drawing social or community concerns under a counter-terror or CVE umbrella risks 'tainting' programming to support or empower women and losing community support. Labeling programs as CT or CVE should be avoided when possible, even if they may positively (though indirectly) support CVE efforts.

It is also important from a community partnership perspective that the government avoid being seen to manipulate or mold specific communities. The mosque empowerment initiative demonstrated concerns that government interference in religion fell only on a specific (ie. Islamic) faith. The way in which the government approached women in the context of mosque empowerment also positioned them as a 'frontline' of mitigation of extremism in the religious sphere, precariously placing them between the government and their own communities. Governments should engage with pre-existing community partners and programs when considering initiatives that may impact that community, and engagement should be viewed sincerely, and not in instrumental terms. Working with existing, well-established community partners often achieves more community buy-in and trust, and work through these channels should be encouraged instead of trying to continuously 'recreate the wheel.'

Another observation is the concern for implications of top-down, government-led initiatives on targeted (ie. Muslim) communities in terms of both government attention and resource allocation, specifically when such resources may be drawn away from other communities and increase inter-communal tensions in a society. The importance of the 'say-do' gap where funding and resources must be matched to project aims is also clear, and a more general principle in successful project design and execution. Project design should be particularly sensitive to ensure engagement of communities is reflective of the diversity of that community – government should not define the community of engagement in limited or proscribed terms.

Finally, women need to be understood in more complex terms than just as moderate voices or mothers. Women can be potentially positive or negative influences in relation to extremism, and have diverse socio-economic, cultural, political, and religious identities. Women may also have differing levels of agency than programming assumes, which should be considered in program design and evaluation. While the UK efforts should be commended for attempting new approaches and shelving them when they are flawed, it is important to recognize past errors and ensure these are reflected in future CVE efforts.

Conclusion

Preventative efforts remain some of the UK government's most controversial aspects of counter-terror and CVE work, yet are some of the most important and necessary. Current efforts to tackle ill-defined 'extremism' and promote 'British values,' as the government appears to be redefining citizen's rights in the name of security, present a new cause for concern and should be continuously scrutinized and interrogated. There is also a great need to consistently monitor and assess how the prevention arm impacts other strands of counter-terror strategy, and influences the communities it engages with.

Women, in their diverse roles in the family, community and varied public roles, remain key allies with a sincere stake in confronting these problems, yet remain on the periphery of broader counter-terror and CVE efforts. As the UK continues to face threats from returning foreign fighters, individuals unaffiliated with a terror groups acting as 'soldiers' on behalf of various organizations, and growing threats from right wing and other extremisms, it is easy to see the importance of coherent and sincere preventative efforts. There should also be a growing recognition that while security and intelligence services, and robust terrorism legislation, will always have an important role to play in public safety, terrorism and violent extremism cannot be solved through these efforts alone. The UK government should sincerely consider alternative means of tackling these concerns without continuously resorting to more dubious legislation or practices. Here, women and established women's organizations can advise, partner and inform in all aspects of CVE efforts, while also working to address their own wider concerns. The meaningful engagement of women should be prioritized in future efforts.

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