

Critical Race Feminism and the Counterterrorism Strategy 'Prevent'

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Abstract: There is extensive academic attention on the effects of counterterrorism policy on the Muslim population. My paper goes further by providing an analysis of the intersectionality of religion, race, gender, and the impact of counterterrorism policy, namely 'Prevent'. I focus upon understanding Muslim women's experiences concerning the UK's counterterrorism strategy Prevent, with a theoretical framework of Critical Race Feminism. My research demonstrates the UK government's incorporation of Muslim women into countering violent extremism policies and how this categorises Muslim women as a tool within deradicalisation. I directly address the gap between feminist research and the lived experiences of Prevent for Muslim women in post-16 education. This is achieved by drawing upon the qualitative experiences of Muslim women in further and higher education in the UK. Through an empirical exploration of focus group and interview data, my PhD paper is one of the first to offer insights into Muslim women's feelings surrounding how Prevent operates within the UK's post-16 education sector. To aid this exploration, Critical Race Feminism is used as a theoretical framework to advance the discussion of intersectionality. Within the data collected, certain themes were evident such as: the self-censoring of students; the responsabilization of Muslim women and gendered Islamophobia. The findings state that there is a gendered impact of the Prevent strategy within the UK's post-16 education sector. This paper should be added to the context of debate about the future of Prevent (if any), and to existing work that discusses the securitisation of racialised people.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Education, Prevent, Counterterrorism, Gendered Islamophobia

1. Introduction

To provide context surrounding Prevent, I will begin with a statement from Amnesty International (2023, p.3): 'the UK must scrap the Prevent strategy in order to comply with its international human rights obligations'. Further to this, David Omand, the architect of Prevent, asserted that 'Prevent would be scrapped' if it 'didn't work out' (Pettinger, 2020, p.977). Prevent is a counterterrorism (CT) strategy which operates in the UK. It was developed in 2003 with the official strategy named CONTEST. The Prevent aspect of CONTEST gained prominence post 7/7 due to the concerns of homegrown terrorism (Qurashi, 2018). The strategy has the aim of safeguarding people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism; with the outcome being reducing intent (HM Government (2006). Prevent predominately operates in the 'pre-criminal' space, meaning identifying future threats through strategies of surveillance. Prevent has been deemed as controversial, with reports of Islamophobia, stigmatisation, and isolation of Muslim communities (Cohen & Tufail, 2017; Kundnani, 2009; Faure-Walker, 2021; Sian, 2015). Prevent was widened in 2015, with the introduction of the *Prevent Duty* (HM Government 2015). This placed a public duty on educational and other public bodies to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.

In addition to Amnesty International's and Omand's statements earlier, it has been highlighted that the 'false positive' rate of Prevent referrals- meaning those who are referred to Prevent but who do not need further intervention- is over 87%, with many of these deriving from the education sector (Amnesty International, 2023; MedAct, 2020). Not only has Prevent been described as overwhelmingly aimed at Muslims and young people, but this paper will also demonstrate that the UK government's incorporation of Muslim women into CT policy uses Muslim women as a tool in deradicalization efforts (Rashid, 2016). Ali (2014, p.1258) highlights that 'Muslim youth are discussed, but rarely included in the conversation'. Therefore, this interdisciplinary project utilises Critical Race Feminism (CRF) to analyse the effects of the Prevent policy for young Muslim women in further education (FE) and higher education (HE). The aims were to:

1. Critically explore the gendered impact of the counterterrorism strategy Prevent on Muslim women in further and higher education, in the context of debate about the future of Prevent.
2. Add to existing critical studies on terrorism that discuss the securitisation of racialised people.

2. Theoretical Background: Critical Race Feminism

CRF has its origins in Critical Race Theory (CRT), which focuses upon race as a social construct. CRF also has the added dimension of addressing issues relating to intersectionality by examining how different categories such as race, class, and gender overlap or intersect with one another (Crenshaw, 1989). CRF analyses the 'interconnection of racism with gender and other oppressions' and proposes a unique intersectional feminist epistemology (Hua, 2003, p.2). CRF is therefore rooted within anti-racist and feminist critical work. The theory

can therefore aid the analysis of race, gender, and other issues of racialised women (Wing, 2014). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) discuss how CRF can also help reveal that race is just one of the lines of inequality in racialised women's lives, with layers of discrimination becoming apparent when utilising CRF. From CRF, my research can reveal the lived experiences of Muslim women's perceptions of Prevent, not only by analysing their religion but also taking into account their gender, age and racialisation. CRF epistemologies recognise that racialised women are 'holders and creators of knowledge', rather than relying upon Eurocentric epistemologies that centre majority white experiences (Bernal, 2002, p.107). Therefore, I use CRF to centre Muslim women within this paper to uncover their experiences of Prevent in education.

A popular CRF method is counter storytelling. Delgado and Stefancic (2017, p.171) assert that counter storytelling concerns "casting doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p.171; Lahman, et al., 2015). The counter-story telling technique challenges majoritarian stories. This research used focus groups and interviews with young Muslim women within this counter storytelling framework. Consequently, within this paper, CRF can help demonstrate the layers of discrimination that Muslim women face.

3. Prevent and Muslim Women

Muslim women are often 'essentialised' in countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies and are seen through a maternalistic lens (Brown, 2008; Satterthwaite & Huckerby, 2013). The UK government took on this view that Muslim women are the best placed to challenge extremism that may occur within their communities. As a result of viewing Muslim women as 'moderate agents', the UK government has responsibilised Muslim women in countering terrorism within their loved ones (Rodrigo Jusué, 2022, p.297). Muslim women are viewed within CVE discourse either as 'woman-as-moderate or woman-as-moderating' (Auchter, 2020, p.105). This positions women as integral to counter radicalisation efforts, seemingly shifting the state's responsibility onto the shoulders of women (Giscard d'Estaing, 2017). The way in which women are utilised as part of countering radicalisation can be heavily criticised. For example, Eggert (2017, p.1) highlights that states' often place blame upon women and families as 'bearers of extremist culture' rather than seeing radicalisation as a complex, 'multi-causal phenomenon'.

Whilst Prevent's main focus is upon men, the strategy states that women can provide mainstream voices to challenge ideology, and that Muslim women have the capacity to intervene in the 'radicalisation process' within their communities (Huckerby, 2012, p.5). There were some specific initiatives that focus directly on Muslim women within the Prevent agenda. These initiatives made recommendations for Muslim women in Britain. They addressed issues such as unemployment and discrimination and aimed to encourage Muslim women to 'talk' more, in relation to community cohesion and national security (Cook, 2017, p.6). On the surface, these initiatives appeared to be constructive. However, to engage with Muslim women, the UK government had implemented this through a CVE lens, thus leaving Muslim women feeling securitized (Cook, 2017).

4. Methods

My empirical research is currently ongoing at the time of writing. It has involved four online focus groups, with fifteen Muslim women, and four semi-structured, one-to-one, online interviews with select focus group participants. My findings are based upon a small sample size; therefore, the results may not be generalisable. However, the data provides an in-depth look into young Muslim women's counter stories and how they have been impacted by Prevent. Using CRF as a theoretical framework permitted a smaller sample size, it aided the exploration of participants counter-stories in more depth. CRF proposes deep exploration of racialised women's lived experiences. This was my reasoning behind utilising focus groups in combination with one-to-one, follow-up interviews.

Focus groups were employed to encourage group discussion and to acquire thoughts surrounding certain topics regarding Prevent in education. The interaction that occurred within the focus groups enabled the women to share their own experiences, whilst also allowing for each participant to build on the opinions and feelings of others (Liamputtong, 2007). Focus groups reinforce the realisation that experiences are legitimate and perhaps not always individual, as they are shared by others in the group (Pini, 2002). Pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Theme 1: Self-Censoring

As a result of the thematic analysis, certain themes were evident within the data. Regarding the theme of students self-censoring, many other studies have also concluded that the Prevent strategy has impacted upon free speech and has shut down debate within education due to student fear of being referred to Prevent (Breen-Smyth, 2014; Faure-Walker, 2021; Zempi and Tripli, 2022). Muslim students have also reported having to self-censor their opinions and behaviour (Kyriacou et al., 2017). This coincides with my finding that suggests Muslim women students are self-censoring. Participants provided accounts of feeling 'monitored' within the classroom or feeling as though they must justify their actions. Laila provided me with her counter story:

I decided to tie my headscarf a bit, like tightly, so, to cover more of my face. And I didn't want people to feel that all of a sudden I was being forced to by my family or my friends to cover my face more. So, even if someone did bring it up to be like, "oh, have you noticed that I was trying my scarf a little bit [differently]? Don't worry. It's just because it's cold. There's nothing. There's nothing else going on here". And I kept having to, like, justify that, even if no one asked me. - Laila, FE student

It has been noted that female Muslim students are often regarded a security threat in terms of their dress (Brown and Saeed, 2015). The association of Muslim women, the headscarf, and security suspicions were something that Laila was aware of. A 'change in appearance' is noted as one of the 'signs of radicalisation' (Educate Against Hate, 2023, p.1). From this, Laila stated that she had to "justify" why she wore her headscarf differently in winter, resulting in her self-censoring in terms of her dress. Other participants discussed how they were reluctant to discuss certain topics, particularly regarding their religion, within education. Nasrin discussed how she could not correct a teacher on her own religion:

How could [I] correct this like history teacher?... I was one of the few Muslim students and I just felt like, even if I did voice my opinion to even my fellow Muslim students, they would be like to me, "it's not that deep", like they would just somewhat be passive. So, I just felt very alone in like talking about religion and stuff. - Nasrin, HE student

In Nasrin's quote, she detailed how she felt that even other Muslim students in the class would have been passive to the teachers' comments. Nasrin was uncomfortable discussing religion in education, this was the case with many other participants. Indeed, Saeed and Johnson (2016) discussed how students self-censored from a fear of being labelled at risk of radicalisation by staff. The issue of self-censorship was also evident within Iqra's quote detailed below:

I think my teacher was trying to touch on the whole like situation that's happening right now with like Palestine and stuff, and like because obviously this media like has kind of twisted the whole situation. It's like I just didn't agree with anything he was saying and obviously I wasn't trying to argue or anything. So, and it just means that the situation just made me feel uncomfortable because obviously no one in the class was like educated on the matter. So, everyone was just kind of listening to what he was saying. And I didn't want to get into it, so I kind of just, I literally just left. - Iqra, HE student

Iqra detailed how she felt so uneasy when her teacher was discussing Palestine, that she left the room. It is crucial to note here that some of the focus groups and interviews occurred in and after October 2023- notably when Israel launched its ground invasion within Gaza. The events that unfolded led to concern that students would be under more suspicion and therefore, further targeted by Prevent within schools (Prevent Watch 2023). Breen-Smyth (2014, p.237) similarly found that a 'trend of quietism' amongst Muslims derives from the fear of being perceived as dangerous and ultimately securitised. Indeed, the 'quietism' has impacted upon Muslim students and has been demonstrated within this study's findings. The data suggests that Muslim women students fear that engaging critically in debates may result in them being labelled radical or accused of supporting terrorism, thus the self-censoring continues.

5.2 Theme 2: The Responsibilisation of Muslim Women

The responsabilisation of Muslim women was also found within the data. This often-involved participants questioning why Prevent targeted and encouraged Muslim women to look out for signs of radicalisation within their own communities. The Muslim women within this research provided counter stories, particularly in relation

to how responsibility have been placed upon them and how they feel uncomfortable surrounding this. Tahirah and Nadia told me:

It's not, again, a Muslim women's responsibility, whether she's a colleague, a mother, a wife. It's not her responsibility solely to make sure that the community is strong and avoids radicalism. It's not on us, it's a joint effort. - Nadia, HE student

Why is the government literally after Muslim women? And why is the responsibility of a strong community just on the shoulders of Muslim women? Why is it not a broader responsibility of everyone within that community and society to help people avoid radicalism and extremism? - Tahirah, HE student

Tahirah and Nadia recognised that radicalisation is a complex phenomenon and that one group of people, namely Muslim women, cannot and should not be responsible for tackling it. Indeed, Eggert (2017) also made this point, as they state that extremism and radicalisation should be viewed as a complex phenomenon, not simply placing blame upon women. Some participants also expressed frustration that Muslim women have been expected to “spy on their families or in mosque” through Prevent, further stating that it is not “their job” and asked what the government were doing to support Muslim women in society rather than using them to tackle radicalisation. Again, their counter stories cast doubt on official narratives surrounding Prevent (Lahman, et al., 2015). In addition to this, Sameera, told me:

But these groups are way too big for five ordinary sisters down the road. - Sameera, FE student

She indicated that terrorist groups/organisations are not going to be tackled by a few “ordinary” local Muslim women. This correlated to wider research in the area of Muslim women in CT policy, that suggests that Muslim women have been responsibilised in relation to countering terrorism in their communities (Brown, 2008, 2013; Rodrigo Jusué, 2022). Furthermore, Aameera, told me a story of how she was asked to “keep an eye” on her brothers:

I was asked about my brothers during the time when things were going wrong, like in the UK, and they were just like, oh, just keep an eye on him. If you see them acting weirdly, if they're on their phone a bit too much, if they're watching certain types of videos, just let us know... That's ridiculous. You should never be asking someone a question like that, because you wouldn't go to someone else and ask the same question for me to be keeping an extra eye on my siblings - Aameera, HE student

It was evident that this was Prevent in action, as Prevent follows the assertion that Muslim women have the capacity to intervene in the radicalisation process within their own families (Huckerby, 2012). This is similar to Auchter's (2020, p.105) idea that Muslim women are viewed within CT discourse as moderate forces within their communities that are able to fix problems. These findings suggest that Muslim women in FE and HE are responsibilised into looking for signs of radicalisation whether it be their own friends or family through Prevent.

5.3 Theme 3: Gendered Islamophobia

Gendered islamophobia can be defined as ‘ethno-religious and racialised discrimination levelled at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform individual and systemic forms of oppression’ (Zine, 2006, p.240). The below quotes detail how this gendered islamophobia is evident within the Prevent strategy that operates in FE & HE, and how the Muslim women question the official narratives that surround Prevent and its perceived acceptance:

Women were seen as, you know, submissive and especially when it comes to like the way people sort of view religion in general. - Sameera, FE student

So, I think that...as a Muslim woman, you're categorised into 2 you know, either you're that innocent or oppressed lady, or you're you've got a voice and you're you're kind of dangerous... I hate that I have to prove myself constantly. It really angers me that I have to be the like or the minute. Like somebody mentioned terrorism's mentioned, like you're automatically like you have to be a spokesperson [and] justify like, oh, no, like we're not like that... - Nadia, HE student

Sameera and Nadia both suggested that Muslim women are generally seen as “submissive”, or, as Nadia notes the binary of Muslim women being viewed simultaneously as oppressed and innocent or dangerous and a threat (Mirza, 2015). This is also represented within the Prevent strategy, as it views Muslim women as a group who are able to seek out possible signs of radicalisation. In addition to this, Aameera told me of how she made a comment that she considered to be a joke. The comment was taken much further than she expected:

I must have made like an outlandish comment about how I was going to set fire to the school. Obviously, that would be a normal comment to like any other student to make. But because I was wearing a scarf and this was like kind of post when there was a lot of terrorist like activity going on in the UK, I remember, the police actually got called in to my school and had a sit down conversation with me about counterterrorism. So, they were trying to ask me, like, have you got plans to go abroad? Have you got plans to, you know, to be going joining places like they were asking me very extreme questions. And the fact I was like 14 at the time, 13, I didn't understand why what I'd said was such a big deal. So, then I came to the realisation that because I wear a scarf on my head, because I wear my headscarf and it does show that I'm part of religion, it does give some people, like a rhetoric about me, even though they don't know me as a person... Even though a girl who's sitting next to you with, like, a blonde ponytail could say the same thing, and the teacher [would] probably scoff and act like she didn't hear anything. - Ameera, HE student

It appeared that the stereotypes that link Muslim women to radicalisation or a security threat had influenced staff decision for police to visit Ameera. Furthermore, Ameera discussed how being a visible Muslim woman came with consequences. This was an aspect that was mentioned continuously throughout all the focus groups and interviews- that wearing a headscarf often brought negative perceptions of the young women in education. One participant noted how when she began wearing a headscarf, she was questioned by teachers on why she had done this. Within Ameera's quote, she also suggested that there is difference in treatment of other students by teachers, as she stated, "a girl with a blonde ponytail", noting that the teacher would not regard a non-Muslim students' comments as a cause for concern. Whereas Ameera was securitised due to her comment, and this resulted in her being spoken to by police in school. This binary of Muslim women being perceived as dangerous or threatening represents how Muslim women have been subject to Prevent's objectives, particularly through the Western lens of viewing a headscarf as both oppressive and a security threat (Perry, 2014).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper is one of many to demonstrate the impact of CT/CVE strategies, notably Prevent, upon racialised people. Despite this focus on the impact of Prevent upon Muslim communities more generally, work on understanding the strategies consequences for young Muslim women has been limited. This paper found evidence of self-censoring and the responsibilisation of young Muslim women in HE and FE, along with gendered islamophobia directed towards them through the Prevent lens. The contributions of CRF have enabled the lived experiences of Muslim women to come to the forefront of this paper, particularly when discussing the responsibilisation of young Muslim women from Prevent. This gendered impact of Prevent was clear to see, whether it was through the questioning of wearing the headscarf within education, being asked to look out for signs of radicalisation, or the young women being questioned through the Prevent framework.

I argue that the UK must sufficiently consider the consequences and impact of the Prevent Duty upon young people in education. Furthermore, I argue that this should include the idea of withdrawing the Prevent Duty from education entirely on the grounds that the impact on young people in education is discriminatory and Islamophobic.

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