Veiled Threats
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I was standing in the courtyard garden of the V&A with a group of school girls. They were from a girls’ school in east London and had been taken there as part of a local authority funded project. I had met the organiser, Sophia, through one of my research interviewees. She was a member of the Three Faiths Forum, an organisation set up in 1997 to encourage friendship, goodwill and understanding between people of different faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). The girls had done their morning’s activities, a worksheet that needed to be completed whilst looking at the exhibits, and were outside having their lunch. It was a beautiful sunny day and they were glad to be outside. As we sat on the grass, I chatted to one of the volunteers and around me the girls made the most of a day off school. Boisterous, although not rowdy by any means, they drew attention from other visitors to the museum, principally, I imagined, as all the girls were dressed in their school uniform of black jilbabs. Suddenly, someone in the group suggested that they should all have their photo taken. The group assembled in makeshift lines. As the designated photographer shouted ‘cheese’, a number of the girls struck flamboyant cat walk poses. As various girls held their arms and legs akimbo and balanced precariously on the grass, brightly coloured trainers and jeans could be seen beneath, their scuffed Adidas bags slipping off their shoulders.

The poses were perhaps unsurprising given that the school trip was part of a project called Faith and Fashion. As exuberant as the girls were, as much as they appeared to enjoy the day, and as passionate as the organisers were about the value of what they were doing, the question nonetheless remained. What could an event looking at Faith and Fashion possibly have to do with combating terrorism?

In January 2008, Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) under the Labour administration, announced initiatives to empower Muslim women. She encouraged Local Authorities to use some of the £70m funding they had been given to ‘prevent violent extremism’ to ‘empower Muslim women’. The Preventing Violent Extremism or ‘Prevent’ agenda was a policy response to the London bombings of 2005 and the threat of ‘home-grown’ Islamist terrorism.
In addition to these initiatives at the level of local government, a National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group (NMWAG) was established to advise central government. This advisory board comprised 19 Muslim women from a wide spectrum of communities, professions and traditions and was, at least in principle, supposed to advise the government on issues affecting Muslim women. This number was subsequently extended to 25 after an open application process.

NMWAG was specifically tasked with overseeing three work streams. The first was a role modelling project designed to raise the aspirations of Muslim girls. Its focus was to present Muslim women who had achieved success in atypical careers as role models. There were six regional road shows which were accompanied by the publication of a booklet featuring 12 successful women and a website was launched called Our Choices. Secondly, there was a project aimed at improving the religious understanding of Muslim women in society as part of a wider project on ‘Faith Capacity’ focused on ‘theological disclosure’ or ‘theological interpretation’. Thirdly, there was a campaign to increase the civic participation of Muslim women through training and mentoring which was linked to a Councillors’ Commission project to increase the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) women representatives more generally.

The acronym EMW (‘Empowering Muslim Women’) will be used to refer to the broad policy initiative which includes the three work streams within NMWAG’s remit, as well as local authority projects funded through Prevent which were focused on Muslim women and girls. The EMW initiatives, in conjunction with parallel initiatives for youth under the remit of the Young Muslims Advisory Group (YMAG), were part of an agenda to ‘give the silent majority a stronger voice’ (Winnett 2008:1).

These initiatives were introduced against a particular landscape of community cohesion policies and the broader securitisation agenda. In this context, the initiatives and associated policy narratives raise issues about how Muslims, and Muslim women specifically, are discursively produced at a particular historical juncture. On one level, this book examines the process by which social problems are made; the shared common sense understandings through which they are articulated. It explores how ‘the Muslim woman’ is socially constructed through an analysis of contemporary UK racialised and gendered policy discourses and narratives. It examines the emergence of ‘the Muslim woman’ through analysis of the policy agenda associated with the UK’s War on Terror. In addition, however, by using original empirical material, this book also looks at how Muslim women who were themselves
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directly involved or affected by these initiatives navigated and negotiated these top-down policy narratives. It looks at the way in which these ideas were conformed to, resisted or disrupted by policy practitioners. Through in-depth study of a small scale initiative the book manages to capture a range of alternative perspectives regarding the way social policy works in practice.

There is a great deal of both popular and policy fascination with ‘the Muslim woman’ and there is extensive literature available for both public and academic consumption. In such a broad field it is important to specify what this book covers and perhaps more importantly what it is not about. Specifically, I want to define the research remit in terms of its historicity, what claims it seeks to make and which broader debates it contributes to. Firstly, this book is about the representation of ‘the Muslim woman’ within the context of a particular policy paradigm during a particular time period and in a particular place, the UK. This is at both the level of political representation and at the level of discursive representation. The specific focus is the EMW initiatives and the Prevent agenda. As the relationship between empowering Muslim women and combating terrorism is, however, never explained explicitly, the analysis needs to consider the wider policy landscape in order to make the narrative intelligible. This includes issues which are implicitly or explicitly associated with Muslim women, such as forced marriage, honour killings, and FGM. Although such conflations regularly dominate media discourses, these associations are explicitly made in both policy and political discourse which legitimise the more populist variants.

This book is primarily about the UK, however, it cannot be denied that what happened in the UK following 7/7 was very much influenced by the repercussions of 9/11 more globally. As the next chapter shows, the global war on terror has instrumentalised feminism as justification for military interventions and this is reflected at the level of national policy, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtly. Although the focus of this book remains the UK, it necessarily acknowledges the impact of globalisation and transnationalism; what happens globally, influences and is influenced by what happens more locally. The analytical approach set out in the book therefore remains pertinent beyond the scope of the historical and geopolitical specificities of the topic.

Chapter 1 sets out the wider policy landscape associated with the EMW initiatives and looks at the narratives which emerge in the policy documentation around the subject of empowering Muslim women to combat terrorism.
Chapter 2 is based primarily on documentary research and analyses the EMW initiatives and the wider Prevent agenda in the context of Huntington’s Clash of Civilisations thesis. Despite the rhetoric that the War on Terror was not a war against Islam, I show how the language of Prevent is imbued with the language of Huntington’s polemic; Islam as an ideology is blamed and the responsibility for preventing terrorism is collectivised to all Muslims. I describe how these discourses are gendered and argue that the intelligibility of the EMW initiatives relies on constructing a homogeneous ‘Muslim community’ as problematic, particularly vis-à-vis the perceived position of women in it. As the EMW projects cannot be evaluated in terms of success against their stated objectives of preventing violent extremism, instead I analyse what work these discourses do.

Chapter 3 highlights the way particular local circumstances affect how policy initiatives are received and implemented and that, within these geographic variations, issues such as class, ethnicity and citizenship status are also important, intersecting with gender and religious identity. The chapter reflects on the importance of recognising diversity within diversity. In particular it compares policy delivery in local areas where Muslims constitute the only minority population (and are broadly from one ethnic or social class background) with policy delivery in areas where the Muslim population constitutes a more diverse category (in terms of ethnic origin, citizenship status and class, for example), and where they are not the only minority ethnic group in a local area. It will suggest that the Prevent agenda is problematic in both because religious identity is privileged at the expense of other axes of identity. As such it removes opportunities for solidarity with other disadvantaged groups.

Chapter 4 examines the success of one of the objectives of EMW which was to ‘give the silent majority a stronger voice’. Firstly, it questions the idea that Muslim women were absent from the political arena and needed the state’s intervention in the form of such initiatives to be empowered. It explores interviewees’ understandings of Muslim women’s alleged silence in relation to those suggested by policy discourse, considering the ways in which the state’s attempt to ‘give voice’ worked in practice. It is focused on the establishment of NMWAG and the way in which NMWAG operated in practice. I argue that the operation of such initiatives worked instead to constrain Muslim women’s voices, restricting ‘voice’ to a narrow range of speakers, speaking about a narrow range of issues.

Chapters 5 and 6 address the way in which respondents conceptualised ‘empowerment’ in relation to Muslim women. Empowerment is simultaneously both individualised and collectivised. Chapter 5
Veiled threats illustrates how empowerment, as envisaged in the context of the role models road show, is seen as part of an individualistic, aspirational, neoliberal project in which education and employment combine to provide access to consumer citizenship. It introduces the idea of ‘cultural barriers’ to individualised empowerment and illustrates how the discourse of empowerment rests heavily on the trope of mothering.

Chapter 6 develops the theme of collective ‘cultural barriers’. It analyses research participants’ views regarding Islam as both a source of disadvantage, as well as a potential source of empowerment. It focuses on the theological interpretation work stream of the EMW initiatives, examining how it worked in practice. Muslim women’s empowerment acts as a proxy for integrating what is assumed to be a culturally homogeneous yet inassimilable community. The chapter discusses the consequences of this privileging of religion to the exclusion of other salient factors, focusing on experiences of religious discrimination and the impact of such privileging on solidarity with other BME women’s organisations. What might be considered collective but ‘secular’ forms of oppression, arising from different class positions, are instead considered as individual challenges which need to be overcome. In this way, important structural inequalities which are not based on religion which impact on (some) Muslim women’s lives are written out of the analysis.

The conclusion draws together the research findings and analyses them in the context of the themes raised in Chapter 1. No sociological research is carried out in a vacuum and this research is historically located. Any decisions about establishing a cut-off point for my research were taken out of my hands. In early 2010 there was a Select Committee enquiry into the whole Prevent agenda which was very critical of it. As the second year of my PhD (and my interviews) drew to a close there was also a General Election and New Labour was replaced by a coalition of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. At that point it was not clear what the new government proposed, although a review had been planned. In the epilogue I explore some of the most pertinent developments which have taken place since 2010.

Overall, the book argues that policy focused on ‘Muslim women’ collates together all women who are Muslim, a disparate and multiply-differentiated group and de facto attributes any problematic issues to religious affiliation. According to the last census there are 2.7 million Muslims in the UK. This includes a range of women from various ethnicities and different religious traditions and sects as well as converts or ‘reverts’. Diversity at this level is explicitly recognised. Equally, if not more importantly, this figure includes Muslim women based in
different parts of UK, from varying socio-economic backgrounds and with different citizenship statuses. These variations are, however, not explicitly recognised. What emerges in the EMW discourse is that Muslim women are discursively produced within the wider policy landscape as in need of empowerment as victims of oppression. At the same time (some) Muslim women emerge as potential agents of change. Whilst clearly there are women who are both Muslim and marginalised, these efforts to engage them do so solely in relation to them as Muslim women via advocates who may or may not adequately represent them. Consequently, other aspects of their multidimensional identities, on both subjective and structural levels (Brah 1992; 1996), are ignored. The idea of empowering ‘Muslim women’ presents Muslim women’s lives as removed from class, ethnicity, region, age, sexuality and race. This research project is therefore arguably a ‘historically rooted and forward looking consideration of intersectionality’ (Brah and Phoenix 2004:83). As well as perpetuating anti-Muslim racist stereotypes, such policy discourses, focused on religious affiliation alone, also obscure continuities with earlier racisms, as well as other axes of social division in society, such as class and regional inequalities which also affect non-Muslims. This engagement, which is restrictive and externally prescribed, and the underlying discourses represent a form of colonisation which ‘implies a structural domination and a suppression – often violent– of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question’ (Mohanty 2003:18).

Notes
1 Full length outer garments often covering head and hands.
2 Available at www.ourchoices.org.uk and featuring 12 role models from non-traditional careers (including a scientist, a civil engineer and the first Muslim woman to play rugby for England).