Giving the silent majority a stronger voice?

If it’s not men within the Muslim community limiting Muslim women then it’s people from outside...these attempts to empower us, are actually taking away our space for action (Yasmin)

what constitutes the position of the subaltern is precisely the impossibility of being heard (Spivak 1996: 289). In other words, the question becomes not so much ‘who speaks?’ but ‘who hears?’ (Ahmed 2000: 61)

Introduction

One of the overarching themes of Prevent, and in particular those initiatives directed at women and young people, was to give the ‘silent majority a stronger voice’. This was based on the presumption that ‘the Muslim community’ was best placed to tackle religious extremism. It could be facilitated by the government through its support of the so called silent majority, presumed to be moderate and in a position to determine who was susceptible to violent extremism and, more importantly, to influence would-be-terrorists or report them to the relevant authorities. Women (and young people) were identified as part of that majority. The underlying rationale presupposes that women were previously silent and that government initiatives to empower Muslim women would give them a stronger voice. As Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government stated¹ in light of the:

inequalities they [Muslim women] face, and the challenges they experience as they seek to take further steps to participate more fully in their communities, and to tackle extremism...we [in government] must do more to ensure that they find their voice more easily.
This chapter examines these assertions in the light of respondents’ experiences. It begins by examining whether Muslim women could be described as a silent majority and looks at the extent to which Muslim women’s assumed silence arose from ‘their own communities’ as opposed to from those outside. Among research participants, for example, there were more subtle, nuanced explanations for Muslim women’s apparent lack of visibility in the political and policy sphere. The chapter also analyses the wider political landscape during the New Labour era, specifically in relation to women’s political participation, which forms the backdrop to the establishment of NMWAG (the National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group). Finally, the third section of this chapter examines the experiences of this increased emphasis on Muslim women in political life and how this stated exercise in ‘giving the silent majority a stronger voice’ worked in practice. Rather than looking at the specific initiatives which were in any case rather small scale, it focuses on the establishment and achievements of NMWAG, analysing the relationship between the members of NMWAG and the women they were supposed to be representing and considering the extent to which NMWAG was successful in providing a stronger voice and to whom. It argues that only certain voices were permitted in particular contexts and that the way this was done was externally prescribed.

**The Silent Majority?**

In the foreword to *Engaging Muslim Women*, Ruth Kelly wrote, ‘Muslim women...have told us that they often feel excluded, sometimes by their own communities and sometimes by those outside it’ (DCLG 2006: 5). Many of the respondents agreed that, despite the long (albeit fractious) history of state engagement with the Muslim community, Muslim women were very often absent from this process. They themselves had long been critical of the government for always engaging with the same self-appointed, self-styled ‘community leaders’, who were invariably men. Social policy discourses imply that this absence reflected the endemic inferior status of women in Muslim communities. Just as Muslim women are ‘barred’ from mosques, so they are ‘barred’ from engaging in civic society. On further analysis, however, a more subtle picture emerges which, while recognising some male-dominated groups’ objections to women’s involvement in public life, draws attention to the state’s complicity in, and occasional facilitation of, this process. Research participants offered a variety of reasons for the
absence of women which were more complicated than the idea that women were being held back (solely) by community patriarchy.

‘..by their own communities’

Some respondents’ explanations for the relative absence of Muslim women in public life partially conform to the policy discourse which attributes the position of Muslim women principally to ‘patriarchal Muslim men’. Faz Hakim, who had worked at Number 10’s Strategy Unit, told me that she “thought there was a genuine feeling that traditionally women had been ignored or left out by Muslim men...” (my emphasis). Khalida Khan of the An-Nisa society recalled a dismissive response from “one very prominent Muslim leader” when she presented data to him showing how deprived the Muslim population in Brent was in the late 80s. She told me he:

just disregarded it all. You know, they just didn’t take it seriously; they just...fobbed us off and one religious leader said to us... ‘oh yeah, we need sisters to run bazaars and stalls’ and basically that’s all we were good for… (Khalida)

Khalida added, however, that “there were a few individuals, some Muslim men – our own husbands...who were quite supportive.” She also referred to individual men, for example, the Imam at the Central Mosque in Regents’ Park at the time, who was “really supportive” in providing food and the venue free of charge when An-Nisa ran training workshops for teachers. Although the An-Nisa Society might not have received universal support, Khalida’s account does not suggest that they experienced any direct objections from people necessarily because they were a women’s organisation.

Furthermore, rather than any explicit prohibition on women, often it was the type of work that women were involved with which influenced the responses to them. For example, those working in women’s organisations offering support to victims of domestic violence had very different experiences. Pragna Patel of Southall Black Sisters (SBS) and Shahien Taj of the Henna Foundation (formerly Saheli) both work in (secular) organisations focused on offering support to BME women experiencing domestic violence. Both reported hostility from men from the wider BME community (although significantly not just from Muslim men as discussed shortly). As a result of their line of work, these women and their organisations have attracted the ire of some BME men, and they, or their families, have been victims
of harassment. Shahien, for example, referred to people “coming after her” after she had “grassed on” them to the police or other authorities. She told me how her father’s car had been vandalised, in order to harass her saying, “it does happen on occasion, depending on what is going on”. She was, however, very stoic about these incidents, telling me:

So that will happen. Because there will be people in the community who want to take revenge against you even though you’ve done something good, even though you know Islamically and human rights[wise] it was the right thing to do but when somebody’s evil if they wanna come after you, they’ll come after you and do you harm (Shahien)

The hostility exemplified in these incidents is, however, directly associated with the type of work she does and such ‘revenge’ attacks are unfortunately a corollary of the sensitive nature of her work. She did not, however, suggest that any hostility was necessarily because she was a woman or a Muslim per se.

Shahien and Pragna both work in organisations focused specifically on dealing with domestic violence. Other organisations, such as An-Nisa, deal with cases involving domestic violence but did not mention any hostility as a result. Notably, An-Nisa Society is framed very much in religious terms. Its mission, as outlined on its website, ‘is to nurture a positive British Muslim identity and develop a dynamic, empowered and healthy Muslim community by promoting societal change and personal growth. This includes pressing for policies, services and initiatives that are sensitive to the Muslim perspective.’ It may, therefore, be that (secular) organisations focused principally on domestic violence could be seen as more problematic by certain elements of ‘the community’ than an avowedly Muslim woman’s organisation that deals with a variety of ‘family’ issues, which might include domestic violence. As well as the obvious hostility one would expect from perpetrators of such violence, it is also possible that the way in which such behaviour ends up being generalised to all Asian or Muslim men leads to a defensiveness which might not otherwise exist. (That is, however, not to condone such behaviour; it is to draw attention to the way that framing matters).

Although there has been some (academic and policy) attention on the effects of multicultural and community cohesion policies on the ‘white working class’ (Hewitt 2005; Garner et al 2009), there has been little, if any, attention given to the effect of community cohesion policies on other BME communities.3 In discussions with Muslim
and BME women’s organisations, however, these themes emerged as salient. Shahien told me how, in addition to experiencing hostility from “people in the [Muslim] community” in Cardiff, she had also experienced hostility from non-Muslim BME men. When asked why the organisation was predominantly focused on Muslims she explained that this had not originally been the case telling me that:

....Sikh men stopped the Sikh women working with me. They just did not want this to happen and I wasn’t going to go into encouraging another woman from another community, even if she is a friend of mine, ‘cos at the end of the day I’ll go home, she has to live in that community, she has to go to the Gurdwara you understand? I’m not going to cause her problems and I’ve always said to them if you wanna come back anytime we’re more than happy to...(Shahien)

As a result of that experience, and the fact that 90% of her clients are Muslim (because of the demographics of the area in Cardiff in which her organisation is based), Shahien decided in 2007 to focus explicitly on providing support to Muslim women in order to “have clear terms of reference”. This decision highlights the impact of events such as 9/11 and 7/7 and the ensuing Prevent agenda on ‘inter-community relations’ which the previous chapter examined.

These examples show that Muslim women’s organisations have experienced a range of responses from Muslim men, ranging from disinterest to outright hostility and harassment. This is, however, a partial story. The ‘Muslim men holding women back’ narrative is a convenient common sense way of conceptualising Muslim women’s absence in civic society. Hostility has also come from other non-BME men. More than that, however, without underestimating the difficulties faced and overcome by some of the women, such hostility is not the only reason for Muslim women’s absence in the political domain. Among respondents there was an acknowledgment that the absence of women was a necessary corollary of how community politics had developed historically. Furthermore, as many respondents argued, the way in which local and central government politics functioned, contributed to Muslim women’s invisibility in community politics. The following section discusses this.
Veiled threats

...by those outside it

when they say we don’t exist, we do exist actually, the government just doesn’t want to see us (Nazneen)

Black feminist critiques of multiculturalism cite the way in which multiculturalist policies have encouraged an informal contract between government and the more conservative leaders of minority communities (Gupta 2003). Wilson (2006) has described how the state’s interventions in South Asian women’s lives have worked to strengthen South Asian patriarchal relations, arguing that, under pressure from women’s groups to provide protection from violence, the state’s response has been to try and manage and control, rather than weaken South Asian patriarchy. Khalida’s understanding supports this when she explains how local politicians would:

engage with the mosques, because they want votes; so they’d see the mosque on Friday with loads of people, hundreds of people, thousands of people so ... votes so there’s a lot of, you know, like history of mosques with the Labour Party and whatever… (Khalida)

She added that “...it’s not only our men that are sexist, it’s the government or local authority” and that this was evidenced in their replicating and perpetuating stereotypes about Muslim women. She argued that they saw “the power is with the men” and because of “the stereotyped image that women [...] don’t have any say in the Muslim community”, Muslim women continued to be ignored.4 Solomos and Back, for example, cite an interview with a (white) woman from the Labour Party in the early 1990s in which she acknowledges that ‘we are doing nothing particularly to change the situation that Muslim women find themselves in’ (1995: 99).

Shaista claimed that, prior to her involvement in NMWAG, the Government ignored her contributions despite her extensive research and links with the Muslim community (Gohir 2008) telling me that “when government were engaging with communities [it] tended to be mainly men; the voices of women and youth were missing”. This is supported by Faz’s comment, “I don’t think Government were interested in speaking to Muslim women before, they didn’t care, no one asked ever to speak to women”. Her explanation suggested that:
it’s just how things work. I think the whole issue of women not being sort of spoken to is a mixture of how it’s kind of come on … it’s also because people in politics…they wanted to speak to one person – you represent Muslims, you represent Hindus, you represent Sikhs. For a long time communities were happy with that. And again those tended to be initially people who’d come up through the ranks of the mosque, men anyway.

The absence of Muslim women in the political process meant that interviewees thought that women’s interests, needs, concerns (Childs et al 2010) were not considered high priority by male community representatives. Khalida explained that the mosques were not aware of what was happening because of all the:

politicking going on, there’d be one group and then they’d fight and then they’d split and make another group in another mosque…they were so involved in who wants to be the president or the chair, they weren’t seeing that the fire was burning in their own back garden, back home at their families; families were having enormous problems. (Khalida)

Instead, she suggested that the men “just wanted to be councillors”. As a result she argues, “because they [councillors] didn’t meet the needs of the Muslims, they weren’t meeting our needs,” that is, the needs of women and the wider community. Women therefore faced dual resistance from the state on the one hand, and male members of their community on the other (Burlet and Reid 1998). As Yasmin stated:

if it’s not men within the Muslim community limiting Muslim women then it’s people from outside…these… attempts to empower us, are actually taking away our space for action. (Yasmin)

Furthermore, it is possible that the lack of women’s presence is due to the fact that third sector and voluntary organisations are constantly in competition with one another for resources and patronage. As McGhee argues, effective engagement between communities rarely occurs in the context of competition for scarce resources and services (2005). Both longer established and newer organisations would have been competing for scarce funds, suggesting that any objections might not necessarily conform to the ‘Muslim men holding back Muslim women’ logic alone.
Against a backdrop of scarcity, the experience of Khalida and others may not (only) have stemmed from objections to the idea of women being involved per se. Hostility could potentially be seen as unease at another organisation being established that would compete with existing organisations for funding, both public and charitable. This is of course a much wider issue than just within the Muslim community sector, but must necessarily affect relationships between different BME (women’s) groups. As illustrated in the previous chapter, SBS (Southall Black Sisters) had their funding by Ealing Council withdrawn in the interests of community cohesion, whereas local authorities were simultaneously being encouraged to fund specifically Muslim women’s groups dealing with the same issues as part of the PVE agenda.

Back et al note how ‘studies of Islamic political participation need to be contextualised carefully without recourse to grand generalities about culture and faith’ (2009: 2). The last section has demonstrated that the ways in which Muslim women were absented from public life were more subtle, and the reasons proffered, more complex and variegated. Accounts of hostility were often connected to the type of work the organisations did. Those that dealt with domestic violence cases, for example, experienced more direct hostility and this hostility was not restricted to Muslim men. In addition, the workings of local and central government politics may have inadvertently side-lined women. The following section looks at the broader historical landscape of women’s political representation in which the EMW initiatives and NMWAG are situated, namely the impact of New Labour.

**Finding a Voice**

Dustin and Phillips suggest that there was ‘a refiguring of public discourse in 1997’ (2008: 407) with the election of a Labour government and a doubling in the number of woman parliamentarians. As a result, they argued there were ‘more MPs willing to speak out against abuses of women, and a substantial rise in the parliamentary time devoted to matters such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation’ (2008: 405). Dustin and Phillips note that these issues appeared on the mainstream political agenda at that particular moment irrespective of the fact that BME women’s groups had been lobbying on these issues decades before. It is also symbolic of wider discourses in which feminism is disarticulated, as something that is only necessary in relation to the Other, and specifically Muslim women (Scharff 2011).

Rubina told me that she thought the seeds of NMWAG were sown as early as 1997 when New Labour came to power. Faz suggested this
process of increasing the civic participation of women was ‘a natural progression’, that with time there is change. Early on she had been quite clear in expressing the idea that Muslim women had been excluded by Muslim men. Later though she contextualised this gender imbalance in relation to how ethnic minority community groups had emerged historically in the political sphere, in the context of both local and central government engagement. She admitted that “it’s very popular now to attack” male community leaders and say that “they don’t speak for anybody’ or that ‘they’re unrepresentative’”. She made clear that we should remember “that they grew up for a reason” which was that:

there was a time when there was no representation for Muslims at all and there were some people coming forward and saying, ‘hang on, listen to us’. These people turned into community leaders. (Faz)

She added that this situation changed because:

Maybe because more Muslim women are in the second generation, with better education, they started coming up from the ranks saying ‘hang on, listen to us’... again I think it’s kind of natural. Yeah, I don’t think you can just blame the community...it’s pretty much in the round you know.7 (Faz)

Shaista, by contrast, firmly associated a greater interest in the potential of Muslim women with a ‘regime change’ both in the Labour party and (consequently) at DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government), that is, specifically “… when Tony Blair left and Gordon Brown took over in June 2007 and Hazel Blears was appointed as the new DCLG minister”. Given that the post had previously been occupied by Ruth Kelly, this suggests it was not necessarily the presence of women parliamentarians per se which changed things as suggested by Dustin and Phillips (2008). Perhaps what mattered more was which women were in which position in government and their relationship to Blair, and later Brown, rather than there simply being a greater female presence across Whitehall. Further, such developments are inflected by local particularities.8 Vociferous Labour politicians such as Anne Cryer in strategic constituencies with significant Muslim populations, such as Keighley, gained prominence through raising the issues of forced marriage.9 By contrast, however, politicians such as Harriet Harman
and Clare Short who have raised more mainstream feminist concerns (around issues such as ‘Page 3’ girls) have been derided for doing so.

Raising issues of timing in relation to Muslim women’s political participation disrupts the underlying presumptions about their silence. In spite of barriers, whether from ‘the community’ (overt hostility or indifference) or in the relations of engagement between local government and ‘community leaders’, it is clear that Muslim women have, in common with many women’s groups (minority or otherwise), been organising and working for their communities and ‘women’s issues’ for many years prior to the EMW initiative. Many of the interviewees were high powered OBE-holding women who had established professional or activist careers well before the advent of Prevent and the EMW initiatives. Furthermore, as Back et al (2009) note, we need to think carefully about what social actions constitute participation in the democratic process; mobilization around faith communities can be a form of political participation.

The An-Nisa Society, for example, was “established in May 1985 by a group of young British Muslim women, in response to the needs of Muslim women and their families.” When I asked Khalida how they dealt with the lack of support from (some) male colleagues and potential allies, she told me “we had already set it up, we just… no longer looked to the men to help us with everything.” She and her peers were, therefore, able to use their own expertise and resources to set up an organisation which is still going strong over twenty five years later. They used their agency and resources in order to provide and develop services which they felt were absent from both mainstream local authority services, as well as those offered by male-dominated mosque based ‘community groups’.

In addition, although some respondents’ accounts correspond to the idea that women were absent (for whatever reason), it is also interesting to note that many clearly had achieved a level of power and influence prior to the launch of the EMW initiatives. A salient example of this can be seen in the case of a meeting Faz attended in Bradford, as a representative of the New Labour Government, which she used to illustrate that “Muslim women tend to get ignored”. She described how:

There was a time when I was at Downing Street and I was going to meetings …and it was all men and I had to tell them to go and get some women…I said I’m not going to sit and talk just in front of you, just to men, that’s ridiculous, I don’t feel comfortable for a start... I want to talk to some
women, you know... so they went and dragged all their wives in… (Faz)

In this instance, these Muslim men took orders from a Muslim woman working in Downing Street, and seemingly did not object to her request to “go and get some women”. She had previously acknowledged that community politics overall were not necessarily representative “in a civic sense” (and as discussed shortly, this issue is not necessarily addressed just by “dragging the wives in”). Nonetheless, this encounter illustrates Faz’s power in this particular scenario; she describes how she took control of a situation in which she felt uncomfortable and also the fact that her request was met, seemingly with little resistance.

Many of the women had been very politically active prior to their involvement in NWMAG. Before she was invited to join NMWAG, and in response to being ignored by government (according to her [Gohir 2008]), Shaista set up Muslim Voice UK in April 2005 which was the UK’s first Muslim online opinion-polling organisation. She has also been involved with the Muslim Women’s Network since 2005 which she describes as “a national network of individual Muslim women and organisations that ensures their voices reach government and provides a platform for sharing knowledge and experiences.” Moreover, since her high profile resignation from NMWAG she has continued her work setting up a website ‘Big Sister’, her answer to NMWAG’s ‘Our Choices’ role models project.

Shaista had been informally involved in government through various networks and suggested that it was in fact Muslim women, such as herself, who highlighted the absence of women to government Ministers, rather than Ministers or civil servants identifying a problem. She argues that “she had been complaining for a while” and as a result of her persistence she, “eventually actually got onto one of these round table meetings”.

in my very first meeting…I raised it very quickly and said, ‘where are the voices of women?’ you need to empower women, you need to get more voices of women, of Muslim women round the table because I think actually they can be quite, erm, you know, in terms of preventing violent extremism, you know, they could play a role basically (Shaista)

Shaista’s use of the term ‘empowerment’ raises a number of possibilities. First, it could represent an uncritical reiteration of the discourse, or
Veiled threats

equally it could suggest that she herself was instrumental in the term being adopted. She also uncritically uses the idea of ‘voice’: that just by ‘having more voices around the table’, Muslim women would be listened to. In considering issues of silence or invisibility, it is possible that the existence of Muslim women’s groups was not recognised simply through a lack of knowledge or awareness. Much of the machinations of community engagement are ad hoc and informal and so Muslim women’s apparent silence and invisibility is possibly a consequence of this, rather than an explicit prohibition on women. In addition, perhaps not all of these groups comprised the type of Muslim women the government was interested in seeing. An-Nisa say they were pushing for anti-religious discrimination legislation, based on their experiences of working in Brent, from as early as the late 1980s and claim credit for contributing to finally putting the issue on the government’s agenda. In addition, they were vehemently against the Prevent agenda and very vocally contested it. By contrast, organisations focused more specifically on issues like domestic violence and honour related violence often received vocal political support and patronage from the likes of imperial feminists such as Anne Cryer, even if this was not always matched with financial support.

Having questioned the presumption that Muslim women were indeed silent or absent from the political arena, the following analyses the effects and impact of government interventions to redress this alleged silence in the context of Prevent, particularly through the establishment of NMWAG.

(Re)presenting ‘the Muslim woman’

as far as all Muslim women are concerned, we can’t say that we represent all of you, it’s such a diverse group of people but… you need to feel confident that you are being representative in some shape or form rather than nothing at all (Hadiyeh)

On the 22nd of February 2010 I attended one of NMWAG’s quarterly meetings. Not all the members were present, a mixture of apologies and no-shows; the snowy weather had affected national transport links. The meeting began with NMWAG members feeding back to the others on progress on the different initiatives they were involved in (role models, civic participation and theological interpretation). This was followed by a discussion on body scanners which, at that time, were being considered for introduction to all UK airports.10 There was a
range of opinions among the women. There was vehement opposition from those wanting women to have the opportunity to opt for a ‘pat down’ in private. At the other extreme, there was unequivocal support for body scanners on the basis that women would be happier with a body scan carried out by another woman secreted away who they would never see. In my research diary I noted it was “encouraging to hear the diversity of opinion” among the group. In addition, however, I also reflected on the ad hoc way NMWAG members had consulted ‘Muslim women’; one said she had spoken to burqa-wearing family members, as though they were the only (Muslim) women, or indeed people, who might have an opinion on the matter. Others appeared to have utilised slightly more formal channels to consult. This diversity of opinion and the evidence of inconsistent consultative processes highlights the broader question of political representation. This section examines the extent to which NMWAG could be seen to be representative of Muslim women.

The construction of homogenous communities in the multiculturalist policy paradigm has reinforced a particular male- and conservative-dominated ordering of gender relations within social and political spaces (Burlet and Reid 1998; Yuval-Davis 2011). As such, (BME) community leaders have long been criticised for being unelected, unrepresentative, and for not reflecting the diversity of views and contestations in the community. It could also be argued, however, that similar criticisms could be levelled at NMWAG.

To begin with, recruitment to NMWAG was not open and transparent; the original members were personally invited to join. As a result, the group initially consisted of those women who were already known to government through their involvement in particular policy areas and were invited to apply. Shaista thought that she “was one of the people that was invited because I was probably sitting there round the table”. Similarly, Shahien told me:

I was on the Home Office working group...and that came to an end but... I was known to government, and I was still ongoing-ly involved, I’d be asked to go to meetings, consultations, give my views on different things and out of the blue I got this email to say that this is what’s happened and we’d like to invite you on the group and that’s all I can tell you and that’s it. (Shahien)

Further, they were then asked to nominate others in a snowball effect (or, according to DCLG’s Muslim Women’s Engagement Officer,
NMWAG’s membership was guided by the “principle of recruiting people of renown and then getting recommendations from them”). Not only was this process not open, it was skewed in favour of those individuals already known to government officials because they were working on policy areas which were already the target of government attention, such as forced marriage. As well as setting the agenda (in terms of narrowing the issues which were apparently relevant to Muslim women), the routes to engagement were therefore heavily prescribed by government.

The second round of recruitment was ostensibly designed to be more transparent since there was an open application process. According to the DCLG’s Muslim Women’s Engagement Officer, central government had publicised membership through regional Government Offices and Local Authorities who had much better knowledge of local communities. This was the route through which Kalsoom was recruited. She told me, “I was asked to apply, I think I had an invitation from a local government officer saying that this was something you might find interesting, so I applied and I was told I was selected because of my experience at grassroots.” Shaista, already a member of NMWAG by then, told me, however, that she also contacted a number of people and encouraged them to apply. She claimed that of the seven who were recruited to join NMWAG in the second round (out of forty applications in total), four were candidates that she had encouraged to apply. These candidates may also have been invited to apply directly by Government Offices or Local Authorities, but this reflects the narrow pool of suitable candidates. The final decision regarding the women who were recruited was made by officials working in Prevent and DCLG, rather than Ministers.

Political representation is the activity of making citizens’ voices, opinions, and perspectives “present” in the public policy making processes. Hanna Pitkin (1972) has described ‘to represent’ as simply to “make present again.”12 To some extent it is generally accepted that “marginalized groups must rely on surrogate representatives” (Mansbridge, cited in Dovi 2007: 61). Although Dovi makes clear that democratic representation should be understood more broadly as “an activity of political advocates” (2007: 54) and that informal representatives can be democratic, the crucial point is that NMWAG was devised and hand selected by government; it was not a grassroots organically formed group.

One of reasons for the second recruitment was that the Group’s initial composition was not seen to be sufficiently descriptively representative (Pitkin 1967) of the ethnic diversity of the UK’s
Muslim community.\textsuperscript{13} This significance of ethnicised differences was reflected in the recruitment of NMWAG. The launch press release referred to the different “communities, professions and traditions” represented by its members. The emphasis, however, was on ethnic and cultural differences as opposed to differences which might materially affect women’s lives. Research participants were clear that ethnic representativeness should be achieved. I was told by the DCLG civil servant (‘Women’s Engagement Officer’) that the original line up of NWMAG had been criticised for its narrow ethnic composition. This was corroborated by one of the NMWAG members as something she had been concerned about:

there wasn’t a single black Muslim woman on the group…
there was no Arab representation, the Middle East…I didn’t think there was enough Bangladeshi representation so actually I said that this was very Pakistani-dominated; we need more diversity

This issue was considered important enough to warrant a second recruitment exercise to invite another six women to the Group. This superficial concern with ensuring that different ethnicities were represented arises from a broader ‘culturalist’ framework which centres on ethnicised groups. It relies on essentialist understandings of identity. As Melissa Williams states, “such assertions do violence to empirical facts of diversity as well as to the agency of individuals to define the meaning of their social…traits” (1998: 6). Such an approach perpetuates the idea that it is these women’s ethnicity which differentiates them rather than, for example, their differential social positioning as, say third or fourth generation working class Muslim women in economically deprived areas in the north of the UK, or Muslim refugee women living in hyper diverse outer London boroughs. Emphasis on such ethno-national differences thus detracts from deeper structural and material factors impinging on different Muslim women’s lives. Factors which they share with other women and Muslims and other men. The way in which Muslim women were engaged with was predicated on their belonging to a particular ethnic group.

It could be argued that the emphasis on ensuring ethnicised representativeness is a response to the fact that NMWAG members were unelected and, therefore, being seen to be representative at even the most superficial level could compensate for the absence of any formalised channels of accountability. The historical policy landscape of multiculturalist lobbying encourages such a view. The emphasis
on ensuring that the ethnic diversity of the Muslim community was represented by NMWAG was not because they (Government and NMWAG members themselves) thought it would make a material difference. Arguably, it was because they thought it would grant the Group some nominal representativeness to compensate for their not being elected and, at least initially, not appointed through a fair and open recruitment process.

That said, however, NMWAG members did not feel personally representative of a particular ethnic group. Adeeba, for example, felt particularly strongly about this, telling me that she never “thought that the woman from Morocco was representing the women of Morocco” or that “the woman who was sat there from a Somali background was representing Somali women...” In relation to herself, she was adamant that she had “never claimed to represent any group, do you understand? And I don’t think any of us should”.

Rather, NMWAG respondents thought instead that they provided substantive representation (Pitkin 1972). That is, whereby representatives’ activity consists of actions taken on behalf of, in the interest of, as an agent of, and as a substitute for the represented. Adeeba told me that NMWAG members “should be there because of [their] experience and...knowledge” and that it was important “to make sure this diverse knowledge and experience of different things is on the table...” Hadiyeh reiterated this view, saying that:

> When issues come up, all the members have expertise in all various issues to do with violence, arranged marriage, forced marriage all these things, you know? Even myself with extremism, obviously, I have an expertise there. We all have various expertise in our respective fields which can be drawn on.

Through Adeeba’s and Hadiyeh’s conceptualisations, those they are supposed to be representing are effectively constructed, constituted, framed and created by the representatives themselves (Saward 2006, cited in Childs et al 2010). Although NMWAG members were clear about who they were not speaking on behalf of (that is, not Pakistanis, or women in Bradford or Yorkshire), they were less clear about who they were speaking for. During the course of our interview, Adeeba said she was “there to talk about what [she] felt as a Muslim woman” but she also variously claimed to be “talking about Muslim women as a whole” and, “the Muslim woman” or also just “women who were Muslim”.
Closely associated with, if not inseparable from, this idea of representation is that of accountability. According to Mansbridge (2009), there are two models of accountability, the sanctions and the selection model. The sanctions model presumes that there will be differences between what the represented and representatives want. The former will reward the latter for good behaviour through repeat votes. Clearly this is not relevant without a direct constituency that is, there were no electoral routes through which to appoint NMWAG members (although clearly such a view may be applicable in discussions of the ‘Black vote’ or the ‘Muslim vote’). By contrast, the selection model of accountability presumes that representatives have self-motivated and exogenous reasons for carrying out the wishes of the represented. The question for NMWAG members, therefore, becomes one of knowledge of Muslim women’s concerns and the paths via which they come to know these.

All the NMWAG members were quite high profile in their respective fields. Nonetheless, they had varying degrees of contact with the potential targets of the EMW initiative. This raises an alternative cleavage of difference between NMWAG members which is more relevant when considering representation and accountability than superficial ethnicised differences. That is the extent to which NMWAG members were connected to the ‘grassroots’. This theme came up frequently and created a hierarchy within NMWAG members deemed most entitled to speak for or on behalf of ‘Muslim women’. NMWAG members could be distinguished on the basis of their direct involvement in grassroots organisations: first, those such as Adeeba in Bradford and Shahien in Cardiff directly involved in and heading up grassroots organisations (QED Foundation and Henna Foundation respectively); umbrella organisations headed up by Shaista and Kalsoom (Muslim Women’s Network and the Bristol Muslim Women’s network); and third, successful Muslim women who have some relevant knowledge and experience who can act as articulate advocates (for example, Sabina Lakha who had legal expertise of both English and Sharia legal systems, or Fareena Alam, editor of Q-News). An example of divergent views and emphases between those more directly involved in grassroots and those recruited in a more advisory capacity can be seen in the differing views regarding the inclusion of Amina Wadud in the theological interpretation project (see Chapter 6). The latter thought it was right that she was involved, whereas the former were more concerned about the controversy surrounding her and about how she would be received at the grassroots level.
Veiled threats

There is also the possibility that there was a degree of intra-group silencing and that certain voices carried more weight. Sabl has argued, in relation to Martin Luther King’s strategy of using Christian spirituality to inform his campaign on non-violence, that:

moral activists, lacking tangible resources with which to exert pressure, paradoxically are often perceived as having more power to effect change, since they lack the burden of connection to selfish interests (2002: 203).

In the context of NMWAG this tendency works to entrench particular stereotypes; those women with most gravitas within NMWAG were those working and campaigning against forced marriage and honour-related violence thus replicating the idea that the defining characteristic for engaging with Muslim women is via the rescue paradigm. By contrast, those Muslim women working with more prosaic examples of discrimination in employment did not have as high a profile. The relationship between the women NMWAG represent and who they are allegedly speaking on behalf of is complicated and problematic often reflecting class differences between NMWAG members too. For example, Pragna (SBS) distinguished between:

Middle class women who can shift in and out of whatever identity they choose and when something gets a bit too stifling they move out and shift gear, do something else for a bit and they move back in…(Pragna)

and the alternative, that is “women who really are boxed…[into]…that kind of rigid identification along faith lines”. Rebecca, one of the Bristol police officers involved in Prevent, observed that the women she met through police outreach work included “housewives” who just want “their coffee morning”. In addition, however, she told me there are “other ladies that go to the group who are really keen to empower women and are keen to get more Muslim women involved in different projects”. But she also highlighted a disjuncture here. Reflecting on the Bristol Muslim Women’s Network established by Kalsoom, she commented:

they’re more the women who will try and encourage other women in Bristol but…I don’t know whether you’ll agree with me [addressing her two colleagues] but generally a lot of the women in Bristol are still sort of [pause] not behind,
but they’re not... their voices are not heard as much as the women on the Muslim Network Panel (Rebecca)

Many NMWAG members were concerned at having to justify their position, telling me “it would have been nice if there was an application process”. The key considerations are not, however, those of representativeness, representation or accountability. These are overshadowed by considerations of the ability of NMWAG members to effect changes: that is, to wield power and to be empowered as political actors themselves. My research notes on the quarterly NMWAG meeting I attended referred to the palpable desire of NMWAG members to make a difference, but also to be seen to be doing so.

Right on the Periphery

The process of “bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it” can be seen as a form of empowerment (Rowlands 1995: 102). Phillips (1995) argues that the politics of presence changes the tenor of the debate; issues that would not be there otherwise are thought about. There was undoubtedly some optimism around the idea of NMWAG originally. Rubina told me that the “symbolic value” was immeasurable. Group members appreciated having access to Ministers, civil servants and the corridors of power in Westminster. There was also recognition of the way that membership of a national advisory body and Prevent as a whole had a positive effect on the ability to influence issues at a more local grassroots level. Kalsoom told me that as a result of her membership of NMWAG, she felt that the Bristol Muslim Women’s Network in particular “is out there... it’s certainly established itself as a voice”, adding that:

I know that people don’t like the Prevent agenda but I think it’s been fantastic. It came at a time when we really, really needed it. And great steps have been made in Bristol certainly between the women’s network sitting down with the Council of Bristol mosques and saying we need to work together; it would never have happened before (Kalsoom)

This enthusiasm, however, was tempered by other respondents’ misgivings about what they thought their role in NMWAG was meant to be, and how that worked out in reality. As an advisory body, NMWAG members had anticipated that their role was to advise. The reality was, however, somewhat different. Adeeba told me that
she thought NMWAG was always meant to be “an influencing body rather than a delivery body”. She told me that it “never worked out like that” and she did not think that “the women around the table expected that either”. She was clear that from her “experience of being on influencing bodies, you don’t deliver.”

This was reiterated by Shaista who explained that she thought, as busy women “successful in their own fields”, they would get access to Ministers and could contribute to policy development. She told me that she too was there to influence policy rather than oversee projects and “determine who gets the contracts, to determine if it’s meeting all its objectives”, as ended up being the case. She thought this was:

something that the civil servants should be doing. In fact I felt it was cheap labour because we’re then being asked to do something for free and I haven’t got the time to spare. When there are tons of other projects that they’re [civil servants] overseeing, why couldn’t they oversee these three? (Shaista)

In addition, this disappointment was compounded by the fact that the initiatives which they were asked to oversee were thought to have been predetermined. Shaista, who eventually resigned from NMWAG, suggested that the workstreams NMWAG was asked to oversee:

were predetermined… they made us believe we were having a discussion, that they were our projects… [but]… I clearly remember being told, you don’t need to discuss role models and civic participation in depth initially, because we’re going to do those projects anyway, which kind of left theology … so I felt in a way all three were predetermined – although we ended up saying the third project should be theology – but the whole way it was done it was probably obvious that it was going to be that. (Shaista)

When asked what other work streams NMWAG members would have liked included in their remit, Shaista said that research into the extent of discrimination against Muslim women in employment would have been useful in order to consider ways of tackling such issues. In addition, she and others also raised issues of multiple discrimination, poverty and disparities in healthcare, as well as shortcomings in the provision of ESL (English as a second language) teaching. NMWAG respondents had hoped that their “involvement would have a long term impact on the lives of women”, and their empowerment. They did
not anticipate that it would be “just a quick tick box, one-off thing that actually has no long term effect”. This concern was also shared by Almeena, one of the role models, who told me that:

these initiatives are all well and good while they’ve got the funding and it’s a year-long thing, but what happens afterwards, you know, what’s the point of starting something? (Almeena)

Some respondents told me that the Youth Muslim Advisory Group (YMAG) was given a higher profile than NMWAG. There was also a perception that the group was subject to the whims of whichever politician was in charge. Adeeba told me that changes in DCLG personnel affected morale among the group.

I think Hazel Blears took it very seriously the fact that she used to turn up at each of the meetings and chair them that’s very good so she took it obviously very seriously… what did happen is that there was a change of Secretary of State, and another one comes along and it might not be an important issue for them as it was for the previous one, ‘cos they’ve got their own areas of interest, and I think it was then that it became quite difficult to keep the momentum going because at the end of the day women come around the table, you know they’re inspired by the fact that they’ve got the Secretary of State sat there chairing the meeting who’s going to listen to what they tell them (Adeeba)

Not only were the subjects they were asked to oversee limited and seemingly predetermined, there was a sense that dissent would be frowned upon. A recurrent theme in this policy arena has been having ‘difficult conversations’. This is founded on the premise that multiculturalism has resulted in cultural relativism and moral blindness in relation to so-called cultural practices, such as forced marriages, honour killings and female circumcision. As a result, one of the positive corollaries of critiquing multiculturalism is the idea that these so-called cultural practices are out in the open and subject to societal scrutiny. No-one I interviewed, however, mentioned this openness as a positive outcome of EMW, other than in terms of there being more funding available for organisations already working in these fields. Instead it was suggested that ‘difficult conversations’ instigated by NMWAG members or others were not encouraged.
Shaista admitted to becoming, as she put it, quite “renowned” for being very vocal in NMWAG. She explained that there was an e-group which NMWAG members could use to communicate and discuss issues. At the NMWAG meetings, she felt that the timetable was always too tight and that:

…We were only discussing the agenda items that the government had put on the agenda; they were not our agenda items. As soon as the meetings were over then… there was no space within the meetings for me or anyone to raise concerns. (Shaista)

She explained that it did not make sense for her to “pick up the phone and ring twenty women”, so instead she would raise concerns in an e-group so that everyone could see her views and join in an online debate. She told me, however, that she felt her behaviour was not welcomed and that one of the more senior civil servants working with NMWAG suggested that she contact her to get items on the agenda rather than email NMWAG members en masse directly. Although this could possibly have been justifiable in terms of managing or streamlining communications, Shaista interpreted this behaviour as obstructive, suggesting that it was to prevent debate and to prevent her influencing other NMWAG members. She interpreted the DCLG official’s intervention as a “veiled threat” that she should reconsider her position in the group and that it was a polite way of saying, “maybe you should keep quiet or step down”. She described how after that incident she was disheartened and contemplated leaving NMWAG. In addition, Shaista suggested that the perks of being on NMWAG prevented other women dissenting more regularly, a theme I return to later.

I suppose even power gets to women; it does get to women’s heads I mean suddenly you’ve got access to ministers… you’re invited to 10 Downing Street not only for the launch but when they’ve had receptions there, so you get invited there. There were a few trips abroad as well so you get selected on a free trip abroad. Who isn’t gonna love that? I went to 10 Downing Street, I went on free trips but I still never forgot why I was there and I think a lot of women didn’t want to rock the boat, didn’t want to because it looks good on your CV…(Shaista)
For those not directly involved in the Group, there was a perception that it was an empty vehicle which could or would not address substantial material issues. Humera of An-Nisa Society told me that she did not think it was the job of the advisory group to “go and pacify the community”. Instead, such bodies needed to be there to be critical of the government, adding:

But CLG’s [DCLG] …advisers, for some reason, don’t believe we have a right to that part of democracy, right? … I argue with them. We have a right to dissent, we have a right to be critical, and that’s what democracy is all about, that’s what freedom of speech is all about. But…because we’ve been critical, we get pushed out so….you know I feel really offended by the whole CLG set-up. But that’s the way that they work. As long as you go along, work with them without questioning anything, you’re ok. But nobody’s allowed to question them. At all. (Humera)

In addition to disappointment with the remit and reach of NWMAG, many interviewees, both inside and outside of NMWAG, intimated that the experience of working in or with central government specifically was itself a marginalising experience. As Ien Ang has suggested, ‘othering can take place by acts of inclusion within multicultural discourse’ (cited in Ahmed 2000: 97). This was potentially on two levels: first at the level of what was expected of Muslim women and second the exclusionary environment of the Civil Service itself.

Interviewees reflected that the spaces in which they were ‘given voice’ were narrowly defined. This might be partly explained by the fact that the women were recruited from particular policy areas which were already on the government agenda. One Muslim woman policy consultant, Faz, told me that she avoided Muslim women’s groups in government because they were “right on the periphery”. She added that the:

sexy issues are about imams and about, you know, the kind of theological side of things... the real counterterrorism side of things and the political side of things... it’s almost as though “we’ll put women in this group and they just talk about whatever they want to and then we’ll talk about real stuff” so I …avoid them big time. (Faz)
Further marginalisation occurs because the possibilities for engagement are predicated on a certain understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman, which is to be a victim, to be oppressed. She added:

Trouble is, as soon as you start saying ‘I don’t need your help, I want your politics, I want you to treat me the same’, they don’t care, they don’t want to talk to you anymore. They’ll say, ‘Oh, she doesn’t really represent the community’… (Faz)

Muslim women are only intelligible in the political arena if they fit certain norms. Yasmin told me how she always felt that the government did not see her as ‘Muslim enough’ to be seen as representative of ‘a Muslim woman’. Moreover, she felt that Muslim women were only given a voice “as victims or survivors, who were prepared to disclose their personal stories”. She explained, “whereas you can talk about the veil, …[but] if you want to discuss any other issues, you know I mean the credit crunch, anything, then you’re not allowed a voice because what could you possibly know?”16 She explained:

you know, you are limited to these very narrow subjects and I find it really difficult that given the positioning of the Muslim community as a whole, it diminishes the role of women and all the multiple roles that women have in communities generally as gatekeepers, as mothers, as sisters as whatever role you want to have, as active economic participants and citizens, to work with the men and to actually really engage in, not just the Prevent agenda, but in to the wider integration agenda (Yasmin)

She added:

I actually think it’s oppressive the way Muslim women are viewed, and the fact that the government will only speak to erm….certain Muslim women I’m like, I just sit there and go, ‘well, who’s speaking for me?’, ‘cause I don’t see women who look like me, who sound like me (Yasmin)

This was also reiterated by Faz:

And part of the reason I get annoyed getting involved in some of these things …is because I’ve realised that the
Liberal Left want me to go to them and say: ‘I need your help please, can you give me your support and show me what to do. Give me some money. You know, ‘help me to overcome this oppression from Muslim men...’ and when you trust them like that they love you... and then they’re like ‘I’ve got this wonderful friend, she’s so amazing, she’s speaking out against her own community... doing so much, so brave, you know amazing, amazing!’ (Faz)

I also spoke to Nazneen, who framed this in terms of the government not wanting to empower Muslim women like her because they were more interested in empowering, “…women who can’t speak English, have hijab on and fit the role model.” She thought that in spite of the “rhetoric about Muslim women and empowering Muslim women”, civil servants had no intention of empowering “a woman who’s educated and who’s got a mouth, they don’t want you anywhere near... because then you become a threat”. She added:

so you have your own community trying to keep you out, you have a structure in place...which says it promotes diversity, but it really doesn’t and it does it piecemeal because there’s no support around you so you’re going to leave anyway, and they know it, there’s a huge business to be made out of diversity and credibility every time I hear [...] or somebody speak about it, it makes me sick (Nazneen)

Building on Fortier’s work on the politics of pride, the effect of this way of engaging or interpellating the Muslim woman within this rhetoric is to separate ethnic (and religious) Others into the subjects that must be hailed as figures of the tolerant multiracial Britain, which ultimately reconstitutes the privileges of whiteness (2005). Nazneen described the double bind of being black:

Whereas in the public sector it’s totally not about whether you’re good at your job...no way! And I remember when I was there I just gave up I just thought, OK, everyone thinks I got the job here because I’m black, so that’s what my staff thought, my peers didn’t like me because they thought well, you know a) she got the job because she’s black and b) what the hell does she know about employment sort of thing so I was never made to feel welcome (Nazneen)
Dovi (2009) reflects that inclusion is not just about bringing people from marginalized groups into democratic politics; rather democratic representation can require limiting the influence of overrepresented privileged groups. Clearly, issues of social mobility and entrenched privilege are a much broader issue. Neither Yasmin, Faz nor Nazneen were directly involved in NMWAG but had worked in various capacities with central government. Faz, who had worked at quite a senior level in Tony Blair’s government, told me how working with (white middle class) senior civil servants could occasionally be an alienating experience if you did not ‘bear the signs of “cultural refinement”’ (Puwar 2001: 666).

The biggest thing for me was the Oxbridge thing... they all had this accent which I didn’t have and they all spoke in riddles and….lots of Latin, lots of very, very clever jokes, wordplay... and when they talked to you, and you know I’m talking senior civil servants here, I felt very intimidated because they just seemed to be from this different world and...you know I think that’s changed...but at that time is was very rarefied you know and they made it clear that you weren’t on their level, even though you’d been brought in by the Prime Minister himself, personally appointed... you had to fight for everything you got... you had to fight for information, to be on a distribution list, you had to fight to go to meetings. (Faz)

Nazneen, who had been one of the most senior civil servants under the New Labour government (and incidentally who had been invited to apply for her post) spoke extensively about her experiences of working in both the private and public sector. She told me how she was described by one Ministerial adviser as “scary” because she was an articulate Asian Muslim woman and someone who identified herself as politically Black. She felt that rhetoric “about Bangladeshi women” meant that people made assumptions about her:

‘oh your husband must stop you’, or ‘your dad must stop you from doing this’ or you know ‘men are like this’ or ‘poor you, poor you,’ and actually when you’re an articulate Asian women they don’t know what to do with you – they really don’t know what to do with you. (Nazneen)
Respondents were also subject to experiences arising from patriarchy more generally in the workplace, which affects all women, not just Muslim women. She (problematically) suggested that she thought “white women have been the worst obstacles in my career development”, going on to say that, “if you speak to a lot of ethnic minority women they will tell you exactly the same thing; all my black and Asian women friends say the same thing.” She suggests this is because white women thought of her as a “threat”, “whereas men, particularly older men” had been very supportive to her. Although Nazneen was clear that she did not fit the stereotype of the Bangladeshi woman, she saw no irony in telling me that the white men that had assisted here in her career “were ever so protective, they were really lovely” or that “white men of a certain age…think I’m a little novelty.” Nazneen’s comments make clear that she does not conform to the widely accepted stereotype of the Muslim woman, yet they also position her as a woman having to bargain with patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988) and ‘sexualised and infantilised at a scale that is over and above white female bodies’ (Puwar 2001: 662) – something which she unwittingly appears to collude in. Her experiences with white women are consistent with Scharff’s findings which suggest that (white) women’s ‘self-representation as empowered is intertwined with the othering of Muslim women’ (2011: 120).

Occasionally respondents suggested that they too should also be empowered through their appointment to NMWAG. Shaista criticised other NMWAG members for having secured a lot of contract work through NMWAG. Undeniably for some of the women there were perks associated with their position, such as foreign travel and obtaining a high profile (receiving honours and so on). Following her resignation, Shaista claimed that the only two negative emails she received were from NMWAG members who she claimed said she had ‘spoil things’ for them. At the same time she herself expressed regret where she had not been successful in securing tenders. She told me that she was disappointed not to have got the contract to run the theological interpretation project and described this as “dismempowering”.

**Conclusion**

The rationale for giving the silent majority a stronger voice is based on a number of assertions and common sense assumptions. First, it implies that the reasons for this silence or absence stem from both within ‘the community’ and outside. Respondents’ accounts suggest that any silencing largely came from without and where hostility was
Veiled threats

explicitly referred to, it was connected to the type of work they were involved in. Second, this rationale for giving women as the silent majority a stronger voice is premised on their having been silent. As this chapter shows many of the women had been active long before the establishment of NMWAG. Third, it is premised on the understanding that government interventions to ‘ensure that they [Muslim women] find their voice more easily’ (DCLG 2006) achieved that.

As within the multiculturalist policy paradigm, Prevent and the EMW initiatives involve ‘group making’ and have facilitated processes of reification by ‘ethno political entrepreneurs’ (Brubaker 2004: 166). Historically men have undoubtedly dominated informal consultations with Muslim communities. NMWAG could, therefore, be seen as an admirable attempt to redress this gender imbalance. It is, however, unclear that the Muslim women involved in NMWAG were any more eligible to represent Muslim communities. The issue of representation is not necessarily rectified “just by dragging the wives in”. This is particularly resonant when considering the civic participation initiative which could potentially have been a more far reaching project, but which was not implemented more widely. That is not to deny, however, that many NMWAG members had relevant expertise or knowledge of particular issues, as well as grassroots experience, which qualified them to at least informally advise on issues affecting Muslim women.

In practice, however, NMWAG respondents reflected that, within the Department for Communities and Local Government, they were side lined relative to YMAG which, it was alleged, was given more resources and publicity. Furthermore, there was the feeling that the work streams overseen by NMWAG were predetermined, that dissent was discouraged and that the very experience of working with Whitehall was marginalising. NMWAG respondents felt that they were very well qualified to advise, but that ultimately all they were asked to do was deliver predetermined workstreams. In addition they were not well regarded externally; Humera told me rather disparagingly, “these women are not tackling anything institutional”.

What, then, did NMWAG achieve? Quite clearly it had symbolic value. Given, however, that this was a project driven by Whitehall, this symbolic value was directed at increasing mainstream government’s legitimacy by tapping into a prevalent discourse about Muslim women. In doing so, it was able to counter accusations that Prevent led to unholy alliances with extremists; women, even ex-Hizb–ut Tahir members, could never be accused of representing a radical or extremist threat. It is not clear, however, to what extent this crude attempt to increase the policy’s de facto legitimacy could ever be successful. Just as the
presence of a black President does not mean that the US is post-race; or a woman Prime Minister, that the UK is postfeminist; equally a consultative body of Muslim women advising senior civil servants and Ministers does not mean that women who are Muslim do not continue to be marginalised. The experience of NMWAG reflects Ann Snitow’s comment that, ‘…in a cruel irony that is one mark of women’s oppression, when women speak as women they run a special risk of not being heard because the female voice is by our culture’s definition, that-voice–you-can-ignore’ (cited in Forcey 1994: 170).

The legitimacy of the EMW initiatives, and therefore NMWAG, is undermined by the following: first, that the inception of these initiatives was directly and explicitly connected to the counterterrorism agenda; and second, that Muslim women are not the only underrepresented group that might benefit from being brought into or represented better in political and civic life. Associated with this latter point is the fact that both women and minorities are underrepresented and were these imbalances to be addressed more broadly, then it might follow that more Muslim women may automatically enter the political sphere. In relation to the question of voice, analysing the operation of NMWAG shows that within the category of ‘Muslim women’ certain voices were louder (or heard more) than others; this was often connected to their particular areas of expertise or that they were uncritical more broadly of the Prevent agenda. Overall, however, for NMWAG members, the very process of being brought into the fold is itself premised on their otherness. As Fortier remarks, ‘the embodied multicultural subject achieves unmarked status through the injunction to speak his and her allegiance. One must be seen and heard to declare her pride in Britishness in order to achieve unmarked status. An ‘achievement’ that is endlessly deferred, as the non-white skin is never fully peeled off, in a continuous process of de/re/racialization’ (2005: 573–4).

Although many NMWAG respondents were pleased, at least initially, by government efforts to involve Muslim women, it was as mothers and as guardians of the next generation that they were brought into politics. In this way political engagement with Muslim women perpetuates the image of Muslim women as in need of rescue and empowerment, yet stultifies a more radical liberatory, transformative engagement. The next chapter examines this theme of motherhood.
Notes

1 In the Foreword to *Engaging Muslim Women* (DCLG 2006: 5)
2 It also reflects the presumption that Muslim women do not speak English.
3 Although see Kundnani (2002b) for a discussion of communalism in the context of the UK.
4 Local situations and circumstances make a profound difference to the way in which local politics functions. The An-Nisa Society is based in Brent and Khalida’s account must be understood as specific to the politics in Brent (see Chapter 3).
5 Eade and Garbin (2002) show the ways in which debates and events occurring beyond the national frontier influence local politics in the context of East London.
6 This is in contrast to the some of the Left’s response to the suffragettes in the early 20th century. Anne Phillips notes that some of the UK’s most obdurate opponents of the UK suffragettes were within the ranks of socialist men who thought that the obsession with women’s equality was a dangerously middle-class diversion from the more pressing concerns of class (1995). Beatrix Campbell (1984) reflects on the day to day sexism of the Labour movement in the early 1980s.
7 It may also reflect gendered and staggered patterns of migration.
8 Burlet and Reid (1998), for example, examine the way that women’s political participation in Bradford was prompted by the Bradford riots of 1995.
9 To the extent that it has been said that: ‘Anne Cryer has put her life and career on the line to defend Asian women who are forced into marriages’ (Alibhai-Brown 2000).
10 Although since then plans were dropped due to concerns about exposure to radiation.
11 In addition it is also conceivable that men may have an issue with body scanners or that people would have concerns about children being body-scanned irrespective of religious belief. The fact that this question was asked of Muslim women conforms to the association of Muslim women, dress and modesty.
12 Strictly speaking, however, it is about incorporating new people to the polity rather than making them present again.
13 Descriptive representation refers to the extent to which a representative resembles those being represented (that is, look likes, has common interests with or shares certain experiences with the represented). NMWAG members descriptively represent Muslim women since all self-identify as Muslim and share religious affiliation with their constituency, irrespective of whether they practice or are perceived to be Muslim, in terms of dress, for example.
14 Charlotte Rachael Proudman (The Independent 18 January 2012) wrote about the New Muslim Suffragettes ‘increasing number of Muslim women activists are receiving death threats, fatwas and even hate mail…their crime: rescuing fellow Muslim women from violent and life threatening situations’; ‘they stand alone in their communities and apart from other prominent Muslim organisations…The NMS provide refuge, advocacy and access to the British legal and welfare system for women whose daily lives consist of beatings, imprisonment, torture and even marital rape, as well as the mental health ramifications that unfold over time…These organisations have emerged post 9/11 as a response to misogynist and extremist views which are contaminating the Muslim community…’
15 Originally Adeeaba referred to Beverley Hughes but I am referring to Hazel Blears as that was who she later confirmed she was referring to.
There is an assumption that minorities should always speak for the communities from which they came. Writing in the Guardian (16 July 2012) Nabila Ramdani criticises Najat Vallaud-Belkacem as someone who had overcome a ‘relatively deprived childhood’ and prejudice to embark on ‘a glittering career’ in French politics only to get involved in a pledge to see prostitution disappear whereas, according to Ramdani, she should have been involved in overturning the burqa ban and ‘…working to try to improve the lot of all women in society, including those in the same underprivileged Muslim communities from which she came.’

As Kandiyoti suggests ‘Women’s strategies are always played out in the context of identifiable patriarchal bargains that act as implicit scripts that define, limit, and inflect their market and domestic options.’ (1988: 285)