Veiled Threats

Rashid, Naaz

Published by Bristol University Press

Rashid, Naaz.
Veiled Threats: Representing the Muslim Woman in Public Policy Discourses.
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The Muslim woman: victims of oppression or agents of change?

The idealising of the victim is useful for a time; if virtue is the greatest of goods, and if subjection makes people virtuous, it is kind to refuse them power, since it would destroy their virtue. If it is difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, it is a noble act on his part to keep his wealth and so imperil his eternal bliss for the benefit of his poor brethren. It was a fine self-sacrifice on the part of men to relieve women of the dirty work of politics.

Bertrand Russell (1950: 73)

Introduction

A survey article regarding the impact of the Arab Spring laments its failure to deliver on its potential in terms of women’s progress (Booth et al 2011). The article conforms to the tendency to homogenise all Arab women’s experiences (Abu-Lughod 2013) and builds on the fixation with the uniquely patriarchal nature of Islam and Arab countries. It conflates the divergent experiences of women across countries as (internally) diverse as Libya, Yemen and Tunisia. The authors suggest that ‘Arab women are barely one small step forwards on the road to greater equality with their menfolk’, a statement which reveals more about the journalists’ own preconceptions than the complex realities of different women’s experiences in each of the countries involved. The same article, for example, makes various references to female university graduates and women from highly educated elites, suggesting that some women at least had not done too badly under the old totalitarian regimes. In terms of women’s role in the ‘Arab Spring’, the article is littered with references to their relationships with ‘their menfolk’ as ‘mothers, sisters and widows’, inferring that this represents their motivation for involvement in the movement. Moreover their involvement is primarily framed with reference to food deliveries and the provision of blankets.

The discursive framework established in this article replicates many of the themes raised in this book in relation to how the idea of ‘the Muslim
woman’ in the UK is produced. I have shown that the experiences of Muslim women are homogenised and also seen solely in relation to patriarchal relations with ‘their menfolk’, rather than the multiplicity of their social positionings in terms of class, region and citizenship status, amongst other things. Equally, their political involvement is seen as part of ‘modernising’ discourse even if, paradoxically, it is framed within narrow perceptions regarding the role of women as maternal and nurturing. In contrast to the EMW (Empowering Muslim Women) initiatives, however, at least women’s mobilisations in the context of the Arab Spring are spontaneous, emerging from the grass roots rather than imposed from above as in the case of the EMW initiatives.

This chapter is divided into three sections: the first addresses the key findings of the research on which this book is based; the second situates these findings within wider debates regarding multifaithism and the consequences for solidarity with other BME (black and minority ethnic) and marginalised groups; and the third section offers some thoughts on the limitations of the study and suggests avenues for possible further research.

Unsettling policy paradigms

This book has examined the rationale and practice of the EMW initiatives, which formed part of New Labour’s Prevent strategy from 2008, when they were launched, until 2010 when NMWAG was disbanded. The objective of the research on which this book is based was to provide a historically located intersectional analysis of initiatives to ‘empower Muslim women’ as part of the UK government’s Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) agenda. Social policy contributes to constructing the social problem which is the target of its intervention (Ladner 1987; Harding 1987). While the initiatives were undoubtedly on a relatively small scale (less than £70m), they offered the opportunity to consider a variety of different sociological issues and political concerns. Informed principally by black and post-colonial feminists such as Mohanty (1988) and Narayan (1997) who interrogated developmental discourses around the ‘third world woman’, this research has analysed the way in which the EMW initiatives fit into this framework; specifically, how the Muslim woman is produced in policy and public discourses.¹

In examining the relationship between Muslim women’s ‘empowerment’ and preventing violent extremism I approached the subject from a number of perspectives. To begin with I situated the initiatives within a broader policy context in relation to, at the national
level, multiculturalism and debates on Britishness and community cohesion, and at the global level, the ‘War on Terror’. Second, the logic of these initiatives is premised on the basis that Muslim women need empowering, thus presupposing their disempowerment. I analysed how ‘empowerment’ in the context of these initiatives was characterised and by extension, therefore, ‘disempowerment’. Third, I examined how the EMW initiatives functioned in practice.

In Chapter 1, I set out the five key strands of Prevent (set out in the Prevent Strategy (HM Government 2008: 6). I revisit these objectives having now considered the wider policy discourse in order to suggest how we are to understand them. I argue that ‘Challenging the violent extremist ideology and supporting mainstream voices’ assumes that terrorism (and misogyny) is principally the outcome of incorrect interpretations of Islam. There is a presumption that mainstream voices, implicitly from ‘within the Muslim community’, have the power to effect change. It strongly rests on the idea that there is a ‘them’ and ‘us’ and that mainstream voices require external support. We, that is, the government will help them to ‘get their house in order’, partly through supporting a reformation of Islam or a re-codification of Islam which is consistent with British values, including liberal feminism.

The second objective of the Prevent agenda ‘Disrupting those who promote violent extremism and supporting the institutions where they are active’ does not relate directly to the scope of EMW; it is more in the work of Mosques and Imams National Advisory Body (MINAB) in reforming madrassahs, for example. Since Muslim women are presumed to be peacemakers and at no risk of radicalisation, however, they too may be recruited into assisting in this endeavour of disrupting those who promote violent extremism. Taken together with the objective of ‘Supporting individuals who are being targeted and recruited to the cause of violent extremism’, these are (barely disguised) euphemisms for encouraging surveillance. The objective of ‘Increasing the resilience of communities to violent extremism’ suggests that the Prevent agenda is akin to an immunisation programme. Once the backward and barbaric practices are treated and the community modernised, partially through the ‘empowerment’ of women, then it will be resilient from the disease of radicalism. Finally, ‘Addressing the grievances that ideologues are exploiting’ suggests that dealing with inequalities and discrimination is only important in so far as it removes a potential grievance to be exploited; it falls short of addressing inequalities and discrimination as a route to securing social justice. It builds on the idea that radicalism is a feature of incorrect interpretations of Islam. It does not necessarily imply that discrimination and inequality are equally risk factors, only
that they can be exploited. Nor does it suggest that those who commit such acts are disadvantaged themselves, only that they are politically motivated by and are able to exploit the presence of these inequalities.

A key theme in this book has been the way in which Muslim women are seen solely in relation to their religious affiliation. This is based on Orientalist stereotypes of the uniquely misogynist Muslim man, inflected with contemporary representations of problematic Islamic masculinity in the post 9/11 world. The primacy given to this cleavage of difference reinforces the idea of a narrowly bounded internally homogeneous Muslim community. Other axes of inequality arising from region, class and citizenship status are elided. The research did not set out either to prove or disprove the common sense assumptions underlying the EMW initiatives. Rather its objective was to unsettle them and move beyond the simplistic binaries which dominate discussions on this field.

This book represents a critical intervention by offering an alternative stand point to much of the existing literature in this field (described in Chapter 1). Rather than conform to the social deviancy paradigm within which much research on Muslims is located, it disrupts it by turning the focus of attention on the production of dominant discourses around Muslim women within the field of social policy. Equally the focus on policy rather than media draws attention to the institutional structures within which the idea of ‘the Muslim woman’ is produced and circulated. It therefore also unsettles the often problematic relationship between policy and research.

This book has illustrated the process of ‘discursive reiteration’ (Narayan 2000: 82) by looking at the way in which these discourses are engaged with, co-opted, contested and resisted by those working within this policy arena. Such reiterations operate ‘to help construct the senses of gender identity and cultural identity that shape the self-understandings and subjectivities of different groups of people who inhabit these discursive contexts’ (Narayan 2000: 82). It has analysed the EMW initiatives from an intersectional perspective attending to the historical juncture at which the initiatives took place.

I have not claimed that ‘the Muslim woman’, as characterised in the EMW initiative, came into being purely as a result of this initiative. The discursive formation of the Muslim woman outlined in this book builds on previous and parallel constructions, both throughout history and contemporaneously across the globe. Since conducting the research the political and policy landscape has changed. Many of the themes discussed remain salient, however, since these are not new dilemmas; they are expressed differently in different places and
at different times. Nor does the trope disappear with the demise of the initiative. As such the analysis remains pertinent for informing the analysis of future iterations. I will explore its relevance to more recent events in the epilogue.

Revisiting the War on terror

Counterterrorism is a form of racial, civilizational knowledge, but now also an academic discipline that is quite explicitly tied to the exercise of state power (Puar and Rai 2002: 122)

Through examination of the wider social policy discourses within which EMW was situated I analysed how, at a particular historical moment, with all its concomitant geopolitical contingencies, the discursive frame exemplified in Huntington’s thesis of the ‘clash of civilisations’ (1993) permeated the policy language related to Prevent in the UK. This broader framing depoliticises the roots of Islamist terrorism and reinforces the idea that a belief in Islam is of itself sufficient to risk radicalisation. Any discussion of the role of foreign policy was absent from discussion of the Prevent agenda. This reflects the way such issues have been elided in the debate more generally. As Butler writes with regard to the US, it is impossible to consider the causes of terrorism as this is considered to be tantamount to justifying it (2004). Instead the focus in the Prevent agenda is on an assumed process of radicalisation and women’s role in countering this.

Furthermore, within the discourse of Prevent and the associated discussions about multiculturalism and community cohesion, the issue of women was seen as a principal fault line along which this civilisational clash was being played out; it was the true clash of civilisations. I described how Muslim women were seen only in relation to patriarchal relations within their communities. They were seen as victims of cultural relativism and symbolic of the self-segregation of which ‘the Muslim community’ stands accused. The only direct links between Muslim women’s empowerment and preventing terrorism can be seen in initiatives to equip Muslim women to uncover and report potential terrorist or radical behaviour from within their families – whether that be as mothers, wives or sisters. The idea of rescue which imbues discussions of the status of Muslim women makes ‘the Muslim woman’ automatically a victim. The possibility of women themselves being radicalised is not entertained in the discourse. Such characterisations necessarily foster the demonisation of Muslim
Veiled threats

men, since it is principally from them that Muslim women need to be rescued.

In the context of the UK, the ‘oppression of women’ and ‘violent extremism’ are metonymies. The discourse which positions Muslim women as victims of oppression contributes to a broader anti-Muslim rhetoric which, combined with the emphasis on ‘soft power’ and ‘shared values’ and ‘the battle for hearts and minds’, has real effects in terms of allowing for the dramatic and asymmetric curtailment of civil liberties. As Kundnani writes, ‘never before has such a vast and rapidly expanding accumulation of state power confronted young Asians, Africans and African-Caribbeans, Muslim and non-Muslim, immigrant and British born’ (2007: 167). The following is worth quoting at length.

Under anti-terrorist powers, they face mass stop and search without reasonable grounds for suspicion, the virtual return of the ‘sus’ tactics…new powers of arrest that dramatically extend the time held in police custody prior to any charges being brought. They face threats of raids in the early hours, often on the flimsiest of suspicions of involvement in terrorism or ‘immigration offences’. They face virtual house arrest without the right to defend themselves in a court. They face mass surveillance at places of worship, at train stations and at airports. They face the risk of armed police deploying shoot-to-kill tactics. They face prosecution for expressing unacceptable opinions, for protesting, for supporting foreign charities, for being members of political organisations deemed unacceptable to the government. Finally, they face the ultimate sanction of having their citizenship itself stripped away at the behest of the state. (Kundnani 2007: 167–8)

The discussion of women in the broader policy framework in the UK therefore echoes the way in which the idea of the oppressed Muslim woman in the Afghan context was instrumentalised to justify the invasion of Afghanistan. Within the context of EMW specifically, however, women are simultaneously positioned as potential agents of change. They, along with young people, were deemed to constitute a silent majority who needed to be supported to be given a stronger voice to combat terrorism.
Muslim women as agents of change

...may Allah give you an opportunity to use your voice
(Nazneen)

What is clear in the EMW discourse is that Muslim women are being engaged with solely as Muslim women, whereas clearly such women have multidimensional identities (on both subjective and structural levels). The proposed routes to empowerment envisaged in EMW were both individualised and collectivised. The two are deeply implicated in one another. At a simple level both involved blaming the victim. First, conceptualising disempowerment as a ‘lack of aspiration’ is attributed to ‘bad parenting’, specifically mothering, and a failure to inculcate good neoliberal values. Second, religion itself is identified as a source of disempowerment.

Women’s individual empowerment does not conform to feminist definitions of empowerment, other than the most faux-liberal ones. Rather they are couched in maternalism and promulgating good neoliberal values to secure individualised aspiration; consumption is indirectly promoted, but the emphasis is more on ‘modernising’ recalcitrant Muslims to be good citizens. The idea of empowering ‘Muslim women’ presents Muslim women’s lives as removed from class, ethnicity, region, age, sexuality and race. These other axes of identity do not emerge in the policy discussion and are subsumed within the presumption that Muslim women’s disempowerment is rooted principally in religious affiliation or identity. By contrast, collective but ‘secular’ forms of oppression (or causes of marginalisation) which might arise from different class positions are redefined as individual challenges which need to be overcome. Important structural inequalities which are not based on religion and which impact on (some) Muslim women’s lives are assiduously ignored.

The empowerment of Muslim women acts, therefore, as both a proxy and a conduit for integrating what is assumed to be an internally homogeneous, yet inassimilable community. Rather than acknowledge the complex inter relationship between societal and community attitudes, the agency of individuals and quirks in circumstance that combine to produce particular outcomes, certain ‘cultures’ are deemed to be pathological or deficient instead, as suggested by Huntington. A clear expression of this is in the way that Muslim women, symbols of the dangerous consequences of ‘too much multiculturalism’, are positioned collectively as constrained by ‘cultural barriers’ which they must overcome.
Both ways of articulating empowerment rest (implicitly) on particular notions of subjectivity. The individualised discourse presumes the autonomous aspirational neoliberal subject, whereas the collectivised discourse evokes an image not of individuals but of people as members of a group, the ‘other’ of neoliberal subjectivities. This reflects different understandings of culture and how they produce different forms of subjectivities (Brown 2006). In this way Muslim women are seen as either neoliberal agents, which disregards structural constraints on their lives, or as members of a group in which they themselves are culture and therefore determined by culture. This articulation of empowerment is pathologising, homogenising, and, by disregarding internal differentiation, is itself disempowering since it does not grant full subject status to particular individuals, denying their agency instead.2

EMW efforts to represent Muslim women need to be considered against a broader discussion regarding women’s political participation and democracy more generally. It is clear that women as a group marginalised, more generally in political institutions such as Parliament, local government or local councils. While there was potentially symbolic value in an organisation such as NMWAG its presence did not ultimately alter the wider structural political relations in society. In fact Allen and Guru described the group as ‘an intensive care patient struggling to survive’ concluding that it was ‘more akin to ‘political fad’ than an organisation with the capacity to achieve any real meaningful political empowerment (2012: 8.3).

**Multiculturalism to Multifaithism**

As a whole, the EMW reflects the paradox described by Yuval-Davis in which there is simultaneously an assimilationist focus on Islam ‘in order to try and make our Muslims the ‘good ones’” and faith is regarded as ‘the only legitimised difference within the nation’ (2009: 134). The EMW initiatives discursively privilege religious affiliation. In doing so, the initiatives are arguably an expression of the transition from multiculturalism to multifaithism. I now want to reflect on how the findings in the book relate to the emerging debates on multifaithism which I set out in Chapter 1.

The social policy framework analysed in this book shows an increasing emphasis on religion. These developments could partially be a response to demands from Muslims themselves. They are, however, also the product of a particular historical juncture, not only in the context of the post 9/11, post 7/7 landscape, but also in terms of neoliberal policies of
‘rolling back of the state’, whereby the faith agenda works to fill in the gaps left by neoliberalism in third sector resources (Patel 2008; Yuval-Davis 2011). Associated with this, however, is the increasing reliance on ‘culturalist’ explanations for social problems thus effectively blaming the victim (for being Muslim) and reducing the scope for solidarity with marginalised groups (whether BME or white). This needs to be analysed in relation to the wider economic and political environment, for example, the impact of national and global recessions on inequality and further marginalising already marginalised constituencies.

To an extent research participants’ responses conform to Yuval-Davis’s characterisation of faith being the only legitimised difference within the nation. Some respondents uncritically accepted the homogenisation of Islam as oppressive to women, while others readily took comfort in its potential for salvation. In both scenarios religious difference was privileged. This could be seen in some respondents’ wishes for specifically Muslim organisations vis a vis other religious groups, or because of the failures of multiculturalist policies in addressing intra cultural disparities. Within the category Muslim, respondents differentiated between who counted as a Muslim. While there was little explicit mention of sectarian differences, respondents distinguished between themselves and others in terms of perceived religiosity (as did I in my interactions with research participants). Yasmin referred to the concept of a ‘cultural’ Muslim and the possibility of not being considered ‘Muslim enough’. Given the wider discursive framing of good v bad Muslims (Mamdani 2005a) there is the implicit possibility of being too Muslim, or having too much culture (as an obstacle to empowerment) as suggested by Hadiyeh in Chapter 5.

The research also showed, however, that respondents continued to identify complexities or cleavages of difference between Muslim women in terms of ethnicity, whether ethno-national or ethno-religious (discussed below). Respondents differentiated between ethnic communities within ‘the Muslim community’ and explicit connections were made between the cultural differences arising from these ethnic and ethno-national differences which caused variations in religious practice, for example, in the way in which people dressed. Kalsoom told me how the arrival of Arab students in Bristol had affected the way Bangladeshi and Pakistani girls veiled. As the discussion in Chapter 6 about ‘cultural practices’ showed, some ‘practices’ or crimes (such as forced marriage or FGM) were more strongly associated with particular groups. In addition, as Chapter 4 showed, there was an emphasis on ensuring the ethnic representativeness of NMWAG. Notably respondents did not themselves subscribe to the view that they
Veiled threats

were ethnically representative of particular groups, with the exception of Hadiyeh. She negatively asserted her ability to represent different Muslims since, as a convert, she was not restricted to a particular ethno-religious community, implying, therefore, that others were. According to the respondents the problems of Islam were attributed to its ‘cultural contamination’. A ‘pure’ Islam could only emerge therefore by transcending ethnicised differences to reveal a new Islamic feminist utopia.

During the research, through discussions with interviewees, there were variations between those adopting an overarching definition of Muslim, and those speaking about a particular ethnic group in a city or region of the UK with very specific experiences of migration and settlement and disadvantage. On occasion there were slippages between the two. The argument is not necessarily that we should differentiate more keenly by different ethnic group or different sect, but rather that we should be problem focused and then consider difference within that. I argue that we should disentangle the various problems encountered by ‘Muslims’ and other groups of people to deal with those problems. So, problems arising from citizenship status and socioeconomic status should be addressed principally through those lenses, rather than ethnic or religious group identity.

The failure of mainstream services to meet the demands of Muslim women was a theme among respondents. This was often related specifically to faith based services, as could be seen in comments from Humera and Khalida regarding their rationale for establishing An-Nisa. Their argument was that even once multiculturalist policies were adopted in Brent, not all BME groups experienced these benefits equally, with Muslims in particular being ‘left behind’. Such requests could represent an apparent shift to multifaithism on the basis of Omoniyi and Fishman’s definition in that it constitutes ‘institutional recognition of multiple faiths by the state and the granting of equal rights and protection to devotees by law’ (2010: 315). Multiculturalism was, however, never resolutely secular. Different ethnic minority groups’ demands were not purely ‘cultural’; they frequently had religious underpinnings, for example dietary requirements, prayer rooms, uniforms being more religiously sensitive (permission to wear turbans for Sikh men and headscarves and trousers for women) and paid leave from work for religious holidays. Much, if not all of the liberal plural accommodation of minorities in the legal context even prior to the Rushdie affair (which was widely regarded as the watershed moment for ‘religious demands’ being made more explicitly) has been around religious accommodation (halal/kosher slaughter of animals,
religious wedding ceremonies, wearing of turbans). It was the law that characterised, that named these issues as being about race and ethnicity. Having said that, not all the shortcomings in mainstream services raised by respondents had a religious character, as I will explore later.

In a similar vein, there seems to be some element of amnesia regarding the significance of religious identity prior to the Rushdie affair. Pragna’s comments regarding Indian and Pakistani workers’ associations being secular ignore that the very foundations of the difference between Pakistan and India was a religious divide. Pragna also told me she thought memories of communal violence in South Asians’ countries of origin meant that in the post-war era people preferred not to privilege their religious identity. Equally, however, it could be argued that memories of Partition and communal violence have remained salient issues. Sian (2013), for example, explores how historical discourses of forced conversions to Islam among British Sikhs continue to circulate in the contemporary UK.

Accommodating faith is therefore nothing new even though how it has been accommodated institutionally might have varied. It is nonetheless true that issues are now couched more explicitly in terms of religious identity. There is more overt political mobilisation and organisation around religion and this process has been facilitated by government. We need to think carefully, however, about the origins of that more overt religious discourse and recognise that part of this mobilisation around religious identity is also directly attributable to social policy measures and discourses, influenced by broader geopolitical issues and concerns. Since 1997, when New Labour came to power, the government has engaged more publicly with faith groups and communitarian ideals. Within this, religious communities have been identified as a particular source of social capital, especially in deprived areas where other forms of social infrastructure may be absent.

Even if religious based demands are regarded as a continuation of multicultural demands, one of the clearest developments accompanying a greater emphasis on faith is the rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric and racism, which I explored in Chapter 6. As many of the research participants recognised, the issue of discrimination against Muslim women was a pertinent one, particularly for those who wore veils. In the context of this I revisit and reframe Okin’s question.
Is Multifaithism bad for women?

To address this question we need to distinguish between the theory and practice of multifaithism. The theory of it refers to incorporating religion into the existing multicultural paradigm, offering equality and recognition to religion not just freedom and tolerance (Modood 2010). In principle, as I have suggested, to some extent this is a continuation of what multiculturalism involved. The practice of it can be criticised, however, since it often results in formalising gender discrimination and cultural relativism (Patel and Bard 2010). Yasmin recognised that there was a contradiction between the way in which the EMW policy initiatives ran alongside a faith agenda, given that some interpretations of (all of the world’s) religions are not necessarily favourble to women.

Given the potential for women (across various religious faiths) to be adversely affected by the entrenchment of religion (Patel 2008; Jeffreys 2011), the immediate logical response is to advocate a retrenchment. The dilemma emerges, however, from the fact that religion is clearly important to some women. As I discussed in Chapter 6, respondents recognised the value of Islamic feminism and using alternative religious interpretations in their work against forced marriage, for example. Given that there are clearly women who are Muslim for whom religion is an integral part of their values or an important source of comfort, overtly secular spaces as advocated could be seen as exclusionary (Mahmood 2005).

I observed how, in the context of New Labour’s faith agenda, middle class women could “shift in and out of whatever identity they choose” (Pragna). Equally it was also clear that there were other women who were “boxed… [into]…that kind of rigid identification along faith lines” (Pragna). One solution to this is of course to advocate a retrenchment away from multifaithism as a necessary and sufficient solution. It is also possible, however, that the solution to this dilemma lies more in addressing the factors which facilitate the ability to ‘shift in and out of’ different identities. These could be the result of a variety of factors such as racism and patriarchal relations in wider society. Equally, as Pragna herself notes, the issue of class too is of great importance and I discuss this further below.

Conversely, there are those who conflate the marginalisation of some Muslims to all Muslims, without paying due attention to the diversity caused by other modalities of power. The experience of anti-Muslim racism is constituted through both ‘race’ and class. There are extensive socioeconomic variations within the Muslim community. These inequalities contribute to some Muslim women’s marginalisation in
terms of poverty, access to health services, access to learning languages, or unemployment. Conflating the experience of all marginalised Muslims who may be marginalised for reasons other than their religious affiliation alone is therefore equally problematic if understandable. As Nancy Fraser argues, today’s struggles for recognition assume the guise of identity politics in response to ‘demeaning cultural representations of subordinated groups’ (2000: 119). Muslim women are certainly often the subject of such demeaning cultural representations. As Fraser argues, however, such struggles for recognition ‘abstract misrecognition from its institutional matrix and sever its links with political economy’ which ‘lead to enforce separatism, conformism and intolerance’. She states that such ‘struggles for recognition simultaneously displace struggles for economic justice and promote repressive forms of communitarianism’ (Fraser 2000: 120).

This dichotomy of ‘multifaithism is bad for women’ on the one hand and ‘all Muslims are equally marginalised solely because they are Muslim’ on the other is reductive. Both approaches over-determine the role of religion, privileging it to the exclusion of other salient factors. This research has demonstrated the importance of drawing greater attention to these other modalities of power.

**Intersectional contestations**

This book attempted to deconstruct the idea of ‘the Muslim woman’. More significantly, its objective was to draw attention to the axes and modalities of power which get ignored in the context of the dominant discursive framework in which religious affiliation is privileged. Crucially, differences arising from class or socioeconomic background (in access to cultural, economic and social capital) were not explicitly identified. They were, however, ever present. Such factors, for example, differentiated between different role models. As well as ethnic differences in the composition of NMWAG, there were also class differences between members which reflected the grassroots/high profile expert split in the composition of the group. In Chapter 5 I showed how some of the shortcomings attributed to ‘Muslim mothering’ were in fact attributable to wider societal and socioeconomic factors, for example, in the provision of careers services and the inability of schools to provide adequate careers advice or work experience to students. This was therefore often indicative of a wider problem in schools attended by working-class pupils whose parents’ access to social, economic and cultural capital is limited. Pupils from
marginalised backgrounds share these conditions irrespective of their faith.

Chapter 3 provided an explicit focus on the impact of local variations in both how the role models project worked in practice, and the impact on intercommunity relations. Adeeba’s comments regarding the difference between Bradford’s Pakistanis and Bangladeshis and London’s Bangladeshis reflects the different economic realities of these two cities. Kalsoom mentioned the relationship between Somali and Pakistani women in Bristol. It would be too simplistic to reduce these simply to ethno-national differences. I analysed the way in which local particularities, incorporating local politics and stories of migration which have affected the composition of populations played a crucial part in these dynamics. Although Kalsoom did refer to class when she shared the problematic views of some middle class Pakistani women in Bristol towards Somali women, she did not mention difference arising from their citizenship status or their specific reasons for migration. The fact that even NMWAG respondents recognised that the Group was dominated by Pakistani-heritage women reflects at least an awareness of a larger Muslim population with whom they may have had little in common.

Race and Religion

‘Race’ too emerges in the data as a salient factor and there is often slippage showing the way in which race and religion are mutually constituted. Shaista referred to there being no black representation on NMWAG, for example. Equally, Almeena’s responses to my question of whether she had ever experienced discrimination reflected the easy slippage between race and religion. She referred to her ‘brown face’ never having been a problem for her at the BBC, but also said that she simultaneously carried the burden of representation as a Muslim since colleagues expected her to be an ‘expert’ on forced marriage and ‘honour’ violence. It also shows that religious identity is constituted through race since it is difficult to conceive of a white Muslim having the same experiences. In addition, it reflects her being ‘ethnically’ South Asian since it is equally unlikely that a black Muslim would have been associated with ‘forced marriage’. Almeena’s experience also shows that while she merely carried the burden of (religious) representation, she was fully cognisant of the impact that looking Muslim through wearing the veil could have on others. This is particularly so given that Blair implied that the wearing of the veil was an indication of extremism. The slippage between race and religion was also mentioned by Pragna
who suggested that what was often interpreted as anti-Muslim racism was in fact ‘ordinary’ racism towards South Asians.

Religious affiliation cannot be ignored. The presence and influence of anti-Muslim rhetoric is undeniable. It results in specifically anti-Muslim discrimination and hate crimes and forms the basis of contemporary mobilisation of the far-right (into which non-Muslims have been recruited irrespective of their ‘race’). At the same time, however, we must also resist the lure of religious essentialism that this fosters and recognise the role of the state and its motivations for colluding in this process. The diversity of the Muslim population and the underlying material non-culturalist reasons for that diversity need to be given greater attention, whether that be regional inequalities or byzantine immigration laws. Equally, racism and patriarchal relations in wider society also need to be attended to. As Fraser advocates, ‘what is needed…is an alternative politics of recognition, a non-identitarian politics that can remedy misrecognition without encouraging displacement and reification’ (author’s emphasis) (2000: 120).

Recommendations and scope for future research

This book offers a critique of social policy initiatives undertaken at a particular historical moment. It is therefore difficult to make specific policy recommendations. The broader lessons which I hope emerge are that it is important to consider the way that particular groups of people are produced as objects of social policy and the repercussions of doing this. While not necessarily inspired by an explicit decision to stigmatise Muslims, it is also not neutral; it reflects wider ideological and political concerns with potentially long term effects. What are ‘problems’ to us ‘are built into the flesh and blood of the young’ (Spender 1969 cited in Arendt 1970: 17).

The limitations of this research reflect the skewed nature of this arena. Just as it could be argued that NMWAG was dominated by particular women, so my research too reflected these constructions embedded within the institutional environment itself. NMWAG’s own lack of representativeness and the top-down impetus behind its formation mean that the research only ‘gives voice’ to those involved in the scheme at that level. This research reflects the side-lining of non-South Asian Muslims within the Muslim cohort of engagement; it also reflects the association of Muslim women with forced marriage and what they wear. Nonetheless, the research has unsettled the dominant discourses within the literature and its critical approach offers scope for future research.
In Khattab’s quantitative analysis of 2001 census data he suggests that it is ‘important to move beyond a simplistic notion of a Muslim/ non-Muslim’ and he refers to ‘… the vastly divergent starting points for different groups’ (2012: 570). He describes how ethnic and religious cultural differences characterise aspects of this story and are reflected in the relative integration. He notes, however, that the ‘Muslim Black African group experiences greater penalties than Pakistanis on a consistent basis’ and therefore that we ‘need to move beyond the historical focus on South Asians …. [to one]… that is aimed at a more holistic interpretation and analysis of the Muslim experience in Britain per se’ (Khattab: 571). While on many levels I agree with this approach, it does not go far enough. Such an approach falls short because it is still within the confines of talking about ‘the Muslim experience’, whereas it is important that future research adopts a more intersectional analysis which in particular takes into account socioeconomic differences. Locally situated intersectional research in lieu of an exclusive focus on religious affiliation will be more productive, not only for correctly framing problems, but also for opening up the possibilities for solidarity with others. As Ali states: ‘A political will to challenge categories which make up racial hierarchies is the only way to begin to tackle ordinary racism which arises from the instigation of “difference”’ (2006: 483).

Finally, in solidarity with respondents who raised the issue, many suggested better research was needed on discrimination against Muslim women as Muslims. As Bulmer and Solomos argue ‘...it is important that research addresses the impact of racism in real-life situations. Racial harassment, direct/indirect discrimination, racist violence and victimisation are not fictions or figurations that admit of the free play of signification’ (2004: 10). Thus research with an ‘experiential and analytic anchor in the lives of marginalized communities of women provides the most inclusive paradigm for thinking about social justice’ (Mohanty 2003: 231).

**Conclusion**

Deconstruction does not say anything against the usefulness of mobilizing unities. All it says is that because it is useful it ought not to be monumentalized as the way things really are. (Spivak 1991: 65)

This research and its approach were designed to provide an analysis of a particular policy initiative at a particular historical juncture. Following the 2010 elections and the coming to power of a coalition,
Prevent as a major policy declined in significance and its profile all but disappeared from the policy landscape. It has, however, re-emerged recently following the murder of the soldier Lee Rigby at Woolwich and in response to young British Muslims going to fight for ISIS who it is thought will pose a terrorist threat to the UK upon their return. (I reflect on these developments in the epilogue.) Policy focused on ‘Muslim women’ collated together all women who are Muslim, a disparate and multiply-differentiated group and de facto attributed any problematic issues to religious affiliation. As well as perpetuating anti-Muslim rhetoric, 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.

The book has illustrated how the EMW initiative utilised, fomented and produced common-sense Orientalised stereotypes of Muslim women. Such understandings were analysed in the context of a broader policy landscape dealing with counterterrorism, immigration, forced marriage and ‘honour killings’. Taken together, the various initiatives were essentialising, reducing Muslim women’s circumstances purely to their membership of a religious group. I analysed the way in which social policy discourse around community cohesion and Britishness constructs the Muslim woman in a particular way. I also drew attention to the way in which feminism is invoked and instrumentalised in these discourses, for example, in the use of feminist rhetoric of ‘empowerment’ and ‘giving voice’. Such neo-Orientalist discourses inflect the way in which policy works in practice. Muslim women are engaged with solely as Muslim women at the expense of considering the more complex and differentiated realities of their lives. To be clear, this book does not deny the presence of marginalised women who are Muslim, nor is it a manifesto espousing the liberatory emancipatory potential of Islam, since despite the possibilities offered by Islamic feminism, it acknowledges that some Muslim men can and do persist in sustaining patriarchal relations through recourse to religion.

The extent of diversity among Muslim women has been a recurrent theme throughout the book. What is clear, however, is that different differences are validated differently. Through analysis of qualitative interview material and observation I highlighted the way policy practitioners working in this policy arena (who I interviewed), themselves predominantly Muslim women, conformed, responded to or resisted these characterisations. In the context of the broader policy framework defined by multiculturalism, community cohesion and multifaithism, the discursive repertoires available to characterise this
Veiled threats

diversity is restricted; ethnic and religious diversity are readily invoked to the exclusion of any explicit discussion of other equally (or more) salient axes of difference, such as class, region and citizenship status.

There have been ongoing reports regarding the issues faced by BME women in general in relation to employment. Both figures and anecdotal evidence show that BME women are suffering discrimination. Moreover, if the trend towards austerity continues (and according to November's 2012 Budget statement such policies are to continue until at least 2018), it will be BME women who suffer because they are over represented in both the public and voluntary sectors which are the targets of the most swingeing cuts. Notably, organisations which offer help to those experiencing domestic violence are also suffering cuts. Against this background of austerity those most marginalised in society are becoming further marginalised. As such I conclude with Nancy Fraser’s exhortation:

This is a moment in which feminists should think big. Having watched the neoliberal onslaught instrumentalize our best ideas, we have an opening now in which to reclaim them. In seizing this moment, we might just bend the arc of the impending transformation in the direction of justice – and not only with respect to gender. (2009: 117)

Notes

1 In contrast, however, I am addressing this by looking at women ‘over here’ rather than ‘over there’.
2 With thanks to Christina Scharff for our discussion on this.
3 See Mandla v Dowell Lee [1983] This case defined the terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’ in UK law, with the latter referring to those with ‘a long shared history of which the group is conscious as distinguishing it from other groups, and the memory of which it keeps alive…[and]…a cultural tradition of its own, including family and social customs and manners, often but not necessarily associated with religious observance. Other features were stated to be relevant but not essential. These included a common geographical origin, language, or literature, and “being a minority or being an oppressed or a dominant group within a larger community’ (Jefferson 1983: 78).
4 Growing up in London during the 70s and 80s I participated in the GLC’s multicultural accommodations for example. Concessions to religious dietary requirements meant that at primary school I wore a small sign around my neck (during my lunch hour) which said ‘No Pork’ while my friend from a Hindu background wore one saying ‘No Beef’!
5 In May 2012 an organisation was launched to record instances of anti-Muslim attacks called Tell Mama UK. http://tellmamauk.org/; they reported that 58% of incidents are targeted at women (Allen et al 2013: 1).
6 Yuval-Davis (2011).