Between Political Fad and Political Empowerment: A Critical Evaluation of the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group (NMWAG) and Governmental Processes of Engaging Muslim Women

by Chris Allen and Surinder Guru
University of Birmingham; University of Birmingham

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Abstract

Established in 2008 and launched by the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group (NMWAG) brought together 19 British Muslim women to advise Government on ways to empower Muslim women and increase their participation in civic, economic and social life. This article critically considers the NMWAG as a vehicle for improving how government sought to engage Muslim women within the context of a political and policy agenda that sought to prevent violent extremism. The article begins with a consideration of the ways in which women's groups - including those which might represent more than one constituency, BME women for instance - have traditionally emerged and mobilised as a means of advocating and lobbying on behalf of those they represent. From here, the article considers how government has engaged with faith communities, paying particular attention to governmental dialogue with Muslims, the reasons for this, and where - if at all - Muslim women have featured. From here, the article approaches the way in which the establishment of the NMWAG is anomalous in comparison to historical processes, putting forward some observations and theories to explain why this might have been so whilst also considering the impacts - both potential and actual - within the context of the post-9/11 era. In conclusion, this article considers the impact of the NMWAG as a means of improving learning about the role and process of governmental engagement.

Keywords: *National Muslim Women's Advisory Group; Muslim Communities; Political Engagement; Consultation; Extremism; Gender*

Introduction

1.1 In 2008, the New Labour government set up the National Muslims Women's Advisory Group (NMWAG) as part of a strategy to engage with different levels of Muslim communities under an overarching focus on reducing "Islamic militancy". To achieve this, the NMWAG sought to provide a forum through which government could improve its engagement with Muslim women at the same time as politically empowering them. This article seeks to critically consider the NMWAG as a vehicle for improving understanding about how government sought to engage Muslim women within the context of a political and policy agenda that was focused on preventing violent extremism. To do this, the article begins with a reflection on how women's groups - including those representing more than one constituency, Black and other minority community women for instance - have traditionally emerged and mobilised as a means of advocating and lobbying on behalf of those they represent. From here, the article considers how government has more recently sought to engage with faith communities, paying particular attention to governmental dialogues with Muslims, highlighting the reasons for this and where - if at all - Muslim women have featured. From here, the article contextualises the creation of the NMWAG both within broader historical processes of minority and women's engagement and the impact of the post-9/11 era. In doing so, the impacts - both potential and actual - are explored. In conclusion, this article raises questions about the impact of the NMWAG in terms of successes and failures.

1.2 This article adopts a mixed method approach, significantly drawing upon first-hand observations and the findings from a research team - led by the authors - at the University of Birmingham which worked in collaboration with the NMWAG on a project commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local

Government (CLG)^[1]. As part of this, the research team regularly engaged and interacted with representatives from both the NMWAG and CLG. Members of the research team did this – both individually and collectively – using face-to-face and electronic modes of communication from which records were maintained to support the NMWAG in its role of politically and theologically engaging and empowering Muslim women in the social, political and religious settings in contemporary Britain. The culmination of this project was a two-day residential workshop in Birmingham. Designed and facilitated by the research team, the workshop brought members of the NMWAG together with a number of key individuals from across Britain's diverse Muslim communities to explore a range of issues relevant to the role of the NMWAG. Employing a variety of different approaches, all debates, discussions and conversations were recorded and duly transcribed. From this, the research team produced a 'think-piece' for the CLG: there remain no plans for this to be published. Throughout the project, the research team gained unprecedented access to the NMWAG, its structures and activities as well as its engagement with government. To capture this, some members of the research team kept diaries in which observations, reflections and thinking were recorded. Whilst significant learning was drawn from these resources, this article also draws upon a variety of secondary research activities which included reviews of: both print and online news coverage; organisational and individual blogs and websites; and different resources and documents – including those which were not made available in the public domain – in relation to the NMWAG.

The National Muslim Women's Advisory Group

2.1 In January 2008, the Prime Minister Gordon Brown launched the NMWAG. Bringing together 19 Muslim women who held positions of leadership or were working within their communities under the auspices of the PREVENT^[2] agenda, the NMWAG sought to represent a wide spectrum of different communities, professions and traditions. With a remit to advise Government on issues of empowerment and increasing participation in civic, political and public life, the terms of reference of the NMWAG stated that members would: act as ambassadors for Muslim women at grassroots and represent their views and concerns to Government; provide leadership to communities and act as positive role models for Muslim women; empower Muslim women to engage more with the media to promote positive images and dispel myths about Muslim women; increase participation in civic, economic and social life; and encourage active engagement with Muslim women at all levels, especially those at the grassroots^[3]. The terms of reference added that members would neither represent the organisations they work for nor would they provide a collective view as part of the NMWAG.

2.2 Two months before the formal launch at 10 Downing Street, Hazel Blears as Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government explained the thinking behind the NMWAG. For her, women had an invaluable role at the heart of their families, communities and wider society, something that Blears added was especially true for Muslim women (CLG 2007a). Recognising their multifarious role as the mothers, daughters, sisters and wives – as those who bind families together – she noted how government believed Muslim women had a unique moral authority within their families. Blears explained how the stereotypes of Muslim women as passive, oppressed and somewhat invisible were wrong: 'This must change. We have to get better at listening to Muslim women, valuing their contribution to this country's economic, cultural and civic life, and opening the door for more to get involved'. She went on, 'That is why I have invited a group of exciting, energetic women representing a wide spectrum of communities and traditions to advise Government on how we can do this. As ambassadors and role models, they are going to make a difference by showing just what women can achieve' (CLG, 2007a).

2.3 There appeared however to be some inconsistency in the thinking behind the NMWAG from the outset. Despite the fact that much of the rhetoric was about hearing the voice of Muslim women, there was another line of thinking also. As the CLG noted, Muslim women were also uniquely placed to influence and challenge 'the false and perverted ideology spread by extremists [to] give our young people the skills and knowledge to turn their backs on hate' (CLG, 2007a). Using the language – less overtly the funding also – of counter-insurgency, Blears added that the NMWAG would also advise government on the 'role they can play in winning hearts and minds and tackling extremism' in those most vulnerable, namely predominately young Muslim males between the ages of 16 and 34 and as identified by the security and intelligence agencies (CLG, 2007a). Given the NMWAG was funded using PREVENT monies, it might be asked why the winning of "hearts and minds" was not afforded a more overt prominence. Clearly the discourse of counter-insurgency was less explicit given it did not feature prominently at the formal launch a few weeks after Blears' comments. Similarly however, neither did it explicitly feature in the activities of the NMWAG over its lifespan. Whether much can be drawn from this is questionable but it could be evidence of a lack of clarity about the precise role and function of the NMWAG or a disparity between the perceived objectives of government and the activities of the Group itself. Alternatively, the NMWAG's overt and covert discourses could reflect the less covert aspects of the PREVENT agenda that those such as Kundnani has sought to highlight (2009).

2.4 This suspicion was evident from the outset, with both Muslim and non-Muslim sources being critical. In an article in *The Times*, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB)^[4] openly accused the government of trying to turn Muslim women into spies: 'The government at first wanted our imams to act as spies on young British Muslims and now they seem to want Muslim women to do the same' (Woolf, 2008). *The Times* article also raised concerns about how local authorities would be required to use part of its PREVENT agenda money, circa £70 million, to pay for Muslim women to be sent on training courses designed for FTSE 100 managers to build the skills and confidence required to confront what the newspaper described as "fanatics". Shaista Gohir, the NMWAG's leader at the time, responded directly via an article on the website of her organisation, the Muslim Women's Network. Tackling the allegations head on, she argued that critics were nonsensically deriding the government plan as evidence of them perceiving Muslim women as a suspect community: as bad mothers who would be trained to spy on their

children and as a conduit to reject more traditional forms of Islamic attire in favour of 'westernised clothes' (Gohir, 2008). Rejecting the criticisms, she countered that she was pleased to have been included in the NMWAG as it would go some way to strengthening Muslim women's voices. In terms of tackling the issue of combating extremism she added how '...making Muslim women more influential will indirectly reduce extremism over the long term – not just violent extremism but the extremist attitudes towards women too' (Gohir, 2008).

2.5 Two and a half years later and the NMWAG had undergone significant change. Despite having completed a role-models project which showcased 12 British Muslim women who were described as working in non-traditional jobs and careers without having to compromise their faith or culture^[5], the NMWAG was prone to in-fighting which prompted some personnel changes. In response, government took the opportunity to "refresh" the group's membership, increasing the NMWAG's numbers from 19 to 26. Most damning though was the highly acrimonious public resignation of its leader, Ms Gohir. Dismissing the NMWAG as little more than a 'political fad' (Gohir, 2000a), she expanded on her thinking in an article for the *Guardian's* "Comment is Free", asserting that the NMWAG served no purpose except contributing towards a political agenda that was about overseeing projects rather than offering advice or advocating on behalf of Muslim women (Gohir, 2010b). She made no comment about combating extremism. Once it was likely a new government would come to power at the 2010 General Elections, Gohir criticised those more cynical members of the NMWAG who she said 'suddenly took steps to be more visible and active after a long period of inactivity'. She added that this was linked more to the realisation that a new government would be formed – and so new friends would need to be made - rather than as a response to the Group's impotence in giving a voice to Muslim women. As she went on, 'empowerment means giving away power, which may be difficult to let go of when one has access to the corridors of power' (Gohir, 2010b). Directing her criticisms at the NMWAG as a stand-alone entity, at individual members and at government policy, she questioned the credibility, legitimacy and future viability of the NMWAG. She urged 'the future government to explore ways of genuinely consulting the wide array of women's organisations and community activists through credible mechanisms and not restricting engagement through a particular group' (Gohir, 2010b).

Engaging Black and Asian women

3.1 Within the spectrum of Black women's struggles, the racialised, gendered and classed locations of South Asian women – many of whom were also Muslim - have historically seen their political expressions played out on broader canvases of anti-racism and state responses to black and other minority ethnic groups (Amos and Parmer, 1984, Patel, 2008, Thiara, 2003). United with their Black "brothers" they had fought shoulder-to-shoulder against the multiple facets of institutional racism: in schools; the National Health Service; the racist and sexist immigration laws; and on the factory floor (Amos et al, 1984; Carby, 1986). United with their White "sisters", they fought against gender-based exploitation and oppression, equally within the workplace as much as within the family. Both camps though often marginalised Black and South Asian women, failing to take into account their multi-dimensional and diverse, histories, experiences and interests. The importance of galvanising as autonomous Black women was therefore a necessary outcome if they were to challenge the political and theoretical assumptions and effects of their simultaneous oppression by Black men, White women and the patriarchy and racism of the British state.

3.2 When in 1979 Black and Asian women united and formed the Organisation of Women from African and Asian Descent (OWAAD)^[6], they did so to challenge these assumptions and effects. They demonstrated how Black and Asian women could organise as workers - for instance in terms of the Grunwick strike and the Black nurses and auxiliary staff NHS strikes - against the insidious virginity tests of women arriving from the Indian sub-continent that were being carried out by immigration personnel, and against immigration rules which often divided families, as in the case of Anwar Ditta in the early 1980s^[7]. Other organisations duly followed, autonomously springing from below. Fighting for survival within their own communities as well as against the state, these united organisations and movements were borne out of isolation, exclusion, deprivation, negative perceptions, oppression and a sense of injustice at the limited opportunities and the lack of resources. Hence, the organisations to which they belonged were essentially engaged in lobbying and advocacy as well as advancing the civil and legal rights of black communities as a whole and of Black women in particular. For most, the need to stay independent of state control was a major driver and they followed the long tradition of Black self-help organisations which had continued to provide for the needs of their communities (e.g. child care, appropriate education, saving schemes, support for industrial action) (Bryan, et. al., 1984) and to which the state and other institutions had failed to respond. Within this context Asian women fought for their collective Black identity at the same time as recognising their differences in terms of their cultural and historical specificities. For organisations such as Southall Black Sisters therefore, not only did they work to address the needs of all Black women through recognising the similarity between them in terms of gendered, patriarchal and racial processes of oppression but so too did they pay attention to the specificity of South Asian women with regards to key issues such as domestic abuse and immigration.

3.3 As the political landscape increasingly moved towards one that recognised Britain as multicultural, so funding streams such as Section 11^[8] were made available by the state to help and support local authorities cater for the needs of "immigrant" communities from the Commonwealth. Behind these developments was the underlying assumption that the homogeneity of black and other minority ethnic communities was unproblematic and so in the course of disseminating such funding and seeking representation, many male representatives were co-opted, a practice that was contested by Black women's organisations who felt excluded from such undemocratic processes, particularly where self-appointed leaders routinely presented a mythical united voice. South Asian women consistently warned the state that their interests were not represented by these co-opted, unelected, self-appointed male leaders who alleged to represent their women. These same women argued that by failing to open up to

diverse representations, the state was privileging the voices of South Asian men and business interests over those that were far more vulnerable. South Asian – and Black women collectively – remained excluded from the function of the state as indeed were the organisations they mobilised through free of the direct hand of the state.

Engaging faith

4.1 More recently, Government has sought to engage with those that have a faith as well as a “race” or ethnicity-based public profile. Initially in relation to regeneration and inclusion, this has broadened since the 1990s especially under the New Labour government and its emphasis on greater social inclusion (Allen, 2001; McLoughlin, 2010). As Gilliat-Ray puts it however, New Labour did so on the basis of what she describes as an unquestioned, taken-for-granted criteria: a ‘*modus operandi*’ that is implicit and assumed to be unproblematic’ (Gilliat-Ray 2004, 469). This *modus operandi* largely reflected historical processes of engagement in particular the state’s preference to co-opt so-called “representative organizations”. Despite Black women’s organizations having voiced their opposition to such processes a decade or so beforehand, government persisted with “representatives” without attributing any real thought to the extent to which they actually represented the individuals and communities they claimed to. Maybe more appropriately, there was no questioning of the extent to which they represented the people they were ‘chosen’ by government to represent.

4.2 Part of the taken-for-granted criteria was a series of unwritten terms and conditions: faiths had to be a certain size, have a particular heritage and history, as well as have suitable organisations made up of individuals with the right connections, experience and at times, financial backing (Gilliat-Ray, 2004). More importantly, faiths and their representatives had to unquestionably support various governmental assumptions including who was allowed to be included. As Woodhead (2010) alludes, if and when representatives or their groups chose not to, the conditional alliances with government would soon come to the surface resulting in government shifting alliances to an alternative, typically competing organization or group. New Labour’s criteria was therefore rather more exclusive than inclusive by virtue of the fact that, as Gilliat-Ray put it, it suppressed and marginalized. It also increased competition both within and between faiths. Unlike Black women’s organizations, faith engagement allowed the state to have a hand – albeit not necessarily a direct hand - in structuring and organising their political representation and agendas. This observation would seem to have some resonance with Gohir’s allegations that the NMWAG was part of a wider political agenda.

Engaging Muslim women

5.1 As well as the various pressures exerted on all - including Black - women from across wider society, Muslim women have additional pressures exerted on them from within their own communities. As Santi Rozario argues (1996), Muslim women also have to find ways to overcome the conflict between loyalty to the Muslim ummah and the desire for sexual and other forms of equality. Noting the emphasis within some Muslim communities of the need to “preserve” Islamic cultural and gender roles, including the position of women and their role within traditional understandings of family and community, Muslim women that have sought to self organise and campaign against state-induced oppression and inequality as well as oppression from within their own theological and cultural settings have been criticised as being disloyal to Islam, its heritage and culture. As such, where Muslim women have sought to mobilise and campaign within existing legal and policy frameworks, many have been routinely dismissed as moving too close to “western feminism” or even suffering from “Westoxification” (Allen, 2010). In Britain, Rozario argues this has meant that Muslim women have faced the extra burden of being the carriers of a minority culture required to suppress their own needs and rights in favour of the interests of Islam or their community culture (1996, p.210). It would seem that Gohir was aware of this – maybe already experiencing this pressure – when shortly after the launch of the NMWAG she sought to counter the suggestion the group would be a conduit to reject more traditional forms of Islamic attire in favour of ‘westernised clothes’. As she responded, the NMWAG would address ‘...not just violent extremism but the extremist attitudes [within Islam] towards women too’ (Gohir, 2008).

5.2 As well as noting the impact of groups such as Southall Black Sisters, Rozario identifies Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF) as an organisation which sought to mobilise Muslim – and other – women to actively struggle against the religious practices and cultural values seen to be oppressive within their own communities. In doing so, WAF spoke out against and was opposed to ‘government moves to define complex and diverse communities solely according to “faith”, with public funds increasingly being handed out to religious bodies to provide services to “their” communities on behalf of local and central government’ (Rozario 1996, p.210). Emerging in the aftermath of the Satanic Verses affair^[9] as a women’s organisation that opposed all forms of religious fundamentalism, WAF met considerable opposition from within Muslim communities, from male community leaders as much as Muslim women themselves. Referring to the criticisms of those such as the “Islamic feminist” Rana Kabbani, Rozario (1996) highlights the important class component underlying the identity and religious politics of Britain’s Muslim communities. For those from more privileged backgrounds, Muslim women were seemingly able to exploit the advantages of their Islamic identity at the same time as partially sidestepping patriarchal authority. For those from less privileged backgrounds, the “establishment Islam” and its traditionally oppressive attitudes towards women meant that any sidestepping was far more difficult to negotiate (1996, p.219). Whilst adding that the problems of “establishment Islam” may be either cultural or political as opposed to necessarily Islamic, she adds that this is scant help for those working class Muslim women who most pertinently experience the consequences. It might be suggested that the membership of the NMWAG reflected this dichotomous observation. With many seemingly being able to exploit the advantages of their (middle class) Islamic identity both as individuals and as one part of the NMWAG, it would seem that as a collective they were able to offer little to those (working classes) Muslim women who experience the consequences most sharply.

Government's drivers for engaging Muslims

6.1 A number of unique factors are evident as to why government sought to engage with Muslim communities in different ways from other faith groups. Since the events of 9/11, as national and international efforts to curb "radicalisation" mounted, Muslim communities experienced an unprecedented level of political interest and intervention in their communities, particularly in relation to theological matters and religious institutions. Reflecting wider processes of governmental engagement with faith, Muslim-specific engagement had been on the increase since the 1990s. Predominantly male driven and fronted, formal 'Muslim-Government relations' really began with the establishment of the MCB. Whilst never formally endorsed by government, the MCB, as Silvestre notes, acted very much as 'a privileged interlocutor...a protégé of New Labour' (Silvestre 2010, p.48). Nonetheless, the MCB did have some similarities with traditional self-organisation processes amongst Black communities. Its roots can be traced back to meetings between various groups and organisations – many of whom were engaged in community welfare or running mosques – in the aftermath of the Satanic Verses affair where a number of those present began to identify a collective need to lobby and advocate government with a united voice (McLoughlin, 2010). Whilst being far from representative in terms of either demography or theology, the MCB became something of a convenient conduit through which government could engage and consult with Muslim communities, something that became even more pressing for government in the post-'war on terror' era (Amir-Moazami, 2011). Despite having its critics, many of whom accused it of being made up of self-appointed political opportunists who had little care or contact with the communities (McLoughlin, 2010), the MCB's relationship with New Labour stayed firm for a number of years. It was only once New Labour decided that the MCB had failed to deliver the "goods" in the wake of 7/7 that it was abandoned (Woodhead, 2010).

6.2 Given that Muslim men were seen to have failed to deliver the "goods" in securing the restraint of the "radical" elements within their communities in order to safeguard the national interest, it is maybe unsurprising that government turned its attention to Muslim women. Research suggests that not only are women seen to represent the nation, but so too are they seen as a vehicle for transmitting national and cultural values (and by consequence, vulnerable to defilement by outsiders also) (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989). But so too are the women of 'the enemy' often interpellated as a means of accessing communities that the state finds difficult to reach or engage with (Enloe, 1989; 2002). Against the backdrop of the "war on terror", of war-torn Afghanistan and Iraq, of public images of demeaned, humiliated Muslim men tortured and incarcerated in Guantanamo, and the perpetual debates on the oppression of Muslim women, signified by the hijab and burqa – all of which contributed towards a clear "us" and "them" divide, of belonging and otherness being established – Muslim women were called upon by government to help forge a community that had Britishness at its core. In searching for solutions to the perceived fermenting "radicalisation" of young Muslim men in particular, New Labour sought to galvanize the 'rarely heard' voices of Muslim women through a variety of channels (CLG, 2010b). One of the most important was to issue edicts to mosques to reform and open up spaces to increase women's participation within them; another, to engage women within the state machinery, to elicit their support in "civilising" the "barbaric" Islamic precept that clashed with Western values and civilization. As affirmed by the Muslim Public Affairs Committee, these "new" spaces became important sites where women were not only able to contest their marginalised status in places of religious devotion but so too their positions within Muslim communities and British society alike (Channel 4, 2006). Whilst the challenges facing women in relation to mosques and mosque regimes were not unique to Britain, by presenting them as politicised and problematised spaces that excluded women at the same time as allowing radicalism, so government was able to find resonance between specific community issues and wider governmental policies: to rationalise and justify intervention.

6.3 Ruth Kelly's invitation in May 2006 to some forty Muslim "mothers and grandmothers" to meet with her and Tony Blair, to step into the public realm and show their political agency and allegiance to "British values", provided government with a unique opportunity (Brown 2008, 481). Identified as role models within their communities, the government sought to empower them to 'engage with disillusioned youth' (CLG, 2007a): to exert their independence by challenging the male dominated spaces of their communities. In the aftermath of the 7/7 London bombings of 2005, the stereotypical garb of the passive, demure "Asian woman" was about to be shed by no less than the government itself to reveal capabilities that had remained hidden for so long. Just as the soldiers with their military might sought to free and emancipate women in Afghanistan, the British government would analogously do the same within its national borders. This highly gendered discourse resonated with the past colonial, paternalistic logic of civilising "primitive" cultures and liberating women; another case of white men saving brown women from brown men (Spivak, 1988). Government thinking, and indeed policy, embarked on what Ahmed (1992) referred to as a process of 'colonial feminism'. The projected caring and domestic role of women as mothers, sisters and grandmothers, as reproducers and transmitters of distinctive cultures and values was once more to be explicitly deployed in the forging of a national project (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 7). They were to cement and win over "hearts and minds" and to confront "bad Muslims" who posed a threat. Whilst this may appear to juxtapose a more active role for Muslims women, it nevertheless pleaded to their nurturing role and was in no way a new venture as Mohanty notes:

'imperialism, militarization, and globalization all traffic in women's bodies, women's labor, and ideologies of masculinity/ femininity, heteronormativity, racism, and nationalism to consolidate and reproduce power and domination...mechanisms of informal and not violently visible empire building are predicated on deeply gendered, sexualized, and racial ideologies that justify and consolidate the hypernationalism, hypermasculinity, and neo-liberal discourses of "capitalist democracy" bringing freedom to oppressed third world peoples—especially to third world women' (Mohanty 2006, 9)

6.4 In the narrative of belonging and of the ‘ideal immigrant’ (Anthias, 2002) it could be argued that an attempt was being made to develop both gendered and classed notions of “ideal immigrants” against those considered as “deficient”.

Contextualising the NMWAG

7.1 In this context, there is little doubt that some of the more overt aspects of the NMWAG were anomalous. Silvestre notes that across Europe, the model of engagement adopted by government tends to reflect the levels of self-organisation within Muslim communities in each respective country (Silvestre 2010). In the UK, where not only Muslims but so too BME communities and especially women within these communities have a history of self-organisation, if Silvestre is to be seen to be right, one might expect a “bottom up” approach to engagement to emerge. Depending upon interpretation, the emergence of the MCB might reflect this. Consequently, communities are themselves driving the process and achieve – if the theory is correct – relative autonomy in engaging on the issues that matter most to them albeit with the need to adapt as and when necessary. Where little self-organisation exists within communities, Silvestre (2010) explains how governments are more likely to intervene and impose a “top down” approach and so bring together representative bodies or organisations. As she goes on, this is only suitable where weak forms of self-organisation are apparent as criticisms can be easily posited relating to allegations of the state engineering engagement or that those representing are mere political mouthpieces. In the post-9/11 era, such top-down approaches can – and indeed are - criticised as smokescreens behind which governments seek to establish institutionalised forms of Islam or endorse prescribed “types” of Muslims (Silvestre, 2010). In relation to the issue of security policy and combating violent extremism, given the number of NMWAG members already known to government before their appointment to the NMWAG – for instance Gohir was a government consultant for PREVENT (Talwar, 2010) while Batool Al-Toma was head of the New Muslim Project, an arm of the Islamic Foundation which itself was a recipient of PREVENT funding (Bright 2009) – it would be very easy for allegations of government seeking to bring together certain “types” of Muslims to be made.

7.2 Irrespective of such allegations, the NMWAG was clearly made up of primarily middle-class Muslim women. As such, they were well positioned to promote their relatively privileged position as evidence of being able to engineer change without necessarily recognising the constraints imposed communally, culturally, religiously and politically on those who feel the brunt of the consequences: those working-class Muslim women that both government and indeed the NMWAG recognise as not having a voice. But because government appeared to present an opportunity – albeit, one from above - for women to participate in an “independent” forum that represented diverse organisations, experiences and presumably perspectives, it was able to claim that it was not pandering to any particular viewpoint and was committed to “diversity” in all its forms. However, the mechanisms through which it elicited the support of Muslim women were those that government already supported or were already known to them. Government knew that NMWAG members had already “bought in” to its policies and approaches and so were implicitly endorsing the modus operandi. Whilst some members of the NMWAG did have contact with Muslim women at the grassroots, the level of consultation and co-option that existed was restricted to a tiny minority of individuals whose interest was to give expression to the needs and positions of other Muslim women at the same time as – or so it would seem - expanding their own particular projects and spheres of influence through which they might increase their own opportunities for both economic and political ends. Unsurprisingly however, as the efforts of some of these middle class Muslim women to move on their particular economic and political interests were thwarted, some began to highlight the more manipulative policies of government, to challenge them before ultimately excusing themselves from the process. Others, as Gohir inferred, chose to become more active.

More than just a “political fad”?

8.1 In terms of the NMWAG’s objectives, government stated that the NMWAG would empower and increase the participation of Muslim women in civic, political and public life. Alongside the terms of reference, the CLG added that as ambassadors and role models, the NMWAG would make a difference by showing just what Muslim women were able to achieve. As an overall set of objectives, it is clear that some disparity exists between the aspirational and actual achievements of the NMWAG. As Gohir stated, the NMWAG were prone to long periods of inactivity and this can be seen in the dearth of outputs: a role models brochure being the sum total. Moreover, the use of PREVENT funding, as Section 11 and other funding for Black and other minority community projects before it, created friction and competition. This was compounded by already existing fears of the government’s calls for Muslims to spy upon their communities, their families, their children: to fight the battle for hearts and minds.

8.2 As Bhattacharyya (2008, 22) amongst others writes, the rhetoric of feminism has been deployed in foreign policy as a strategic military goal and in affirming an us-them divide, particularly in assertions about liberating women from the stringent patriarchal arms of the Taliban. This was mirrored within the rationale and justification for the NMWAG, within the domestic politics of New Labour’s endeavours to draw on the strengths of Muslim women’s “unique moral authority” being “at the heart of their communities and families”. Proclamations about the need to “change”, “listen” and “value” the contributions of Muslim women, to meet “exciting energetic women” were used to eschew and disavow the previous racist and sexist imagery that decreed the same women as passive and as demure. In allying their interests with government, members of the NMWAG trod a slippery and an insecure path whereby they found themselves in the firing line for a number of different perceived crimes: as traitors against their communities for colluding with the state and “western feminists”; as down-trodden individuals who failed to take the opportunities provided to them by government, to undermine traditional authority, to deliver the “goods”. As Brown (2008, 487) puts it, ‘...the instrumental use of gender by government has had the impact of relegating Muslim women’s political activism to a sideshow. Muslim women’s political activism is being scripted’. There is little contrary evidence to suggest anything but this as underpinning the

8.3 It can be argued that the creation of a specific group of Muslim women using a top-down approach with an unclear, vague remit and purpose, was bound from the very beginning to divide and disappoint, not least those Muslim women who were co-opted onto the NMWAG. As the funding and status of the NMWAG drew to a close, it increasingly resembled an intensive care patient struggling to survive. The women who set out to curb extremism and the onslaughts against them from both within and without their communities were rendered impotent and left questioning their own viability and legitimacy. Whilst undoubtedly creating a space in which Muslim women were nurtured to act as the mouthpiece of government by appealing to a secular and a human rights agenda with clear anti-terrorist sentiments, it was rarely a space where the 'true' voice of Muslim women could be heard. But as history has shown, true voices can only be heard when those voices are themselves the ones organising and duly mobilising. Devised and controlled by government, the NMWAG went against the autonomous, grassroots, 'bottom up' approach that has characterised and punctuated the political history of Black and South Asian women as united rather than homogenous groups. With an overt remit to politically and theologically engage and empower Muslim women in the social, political and religious settings in contemporary Britain, the NMWAG failed. Likewise also the more covert remit to support counter-insurgency. It can only be concluded therefore that the NMWAG was more akin to 'political fad' than it was in achieving any real and meaningful political empowerment.

Notes

¹It is worth noting that the lifespan of the project coincided with the change of government in May 2010 as well as the acrimonious public resignation of the NMWAG's former leader, Shaista Gohir.

²The terrorist attacks on London on 7 July 2005 (7/7) and the failed attempts a fortnight later (21/7) prompted the then incumbent New Labour Government to rethink and revise its strategy on international terrorism. It did so via two strategy documents. The first, entitled CONTEST, was originally published in 2003 but was later elaborated on in 2006 (Home Office, 2003). A year later, the Government published CONTEST2 (CLG, 2007b). The revised strategy took account of what the government recognised as the emerging threat posed by "home-grown" terrorists, individuals who had been born or brought up in Britain and were prepared to carry out acts of violent extremism against civilian populations in this country. Within both of these, Government identified four different strategic strands through which its overall strategy would be undertaken. The four strands were named: PREVENT, PURSUE, PROTECT and PREPARE. Under CONTEST, PREVENT focused on preventing the radicalisation of individuals (Home Office, 2003). With the publication of CONTEST2, PREVENT was revised to still focus on preventing the radicalisation of individuals, but doing so by placing citizens and communities as partners at the heart of the process (CLG, 2007b). The new Coalition has once more reviewed PREVENT since coming to government.

³The terms of reference were unpublished but were shared with the research team at the University of Birmingham to inform the design and facilitation of the project.

⁴The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is a self-appointed umbrella body for national, regional, local and specialist organisations and institutions from different ethnic and sectarian backgrounds within Britain's Muslim communities. With its roots in the UKACIA, it was established in 1997 to support British Muslims and to build a consensus and unity on Muslim affairs in Britain. It is the largest Muslim umbrella body in the UK at the present time and has engaged with government, especially the New Labour governments, for more than a decade.

⁵Entitled, *Our Choices: what will yours be?* the booklet produced as part of this project is no longer available.

⁶The Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent was the first black women's organisation in Britain to organise at a national level. It brought black women from across the country together to form an umbrella group for black women's organisations (Mama, 1996).

⁷Anwar Ditta came to prominence following the British government's attempts to prevent her and her husband from reuniting with their three children who were living in Pakistan. Ditta's campaign begun in 1977 when her children applied for and were subsequently denied entry to Britain. The Home Office denied that the children belonged to Ditta claiming instead that she had never been to Pakistan and that the children belonged to another woman by the same name. Ditta's case gained national prominence as she herself campaigned the support of Members of Parliament and spoke at various rallies. The campaign attracted the attention of the media, specifically Granada Television, which investigated the claims in Pakistan, successfully refuting Home Office's claims against Ditta. In March 1981, Ditta's children were granted entry clearance.

⁸Here, Section 11 refers to Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966. Section 11 provided access to grants for both local authorities and educational institutions to address the disadvantage - brought about by differences of language or culture - experienced by members of ethnic minorities in accessing education, training, employment and a wide range of other opportunities, services and facilities. Grants contributed towards a proportion of the costs of employing additional staff on projects designed to enable members of ethnic minorities to overcome such disadvantage, and thereby to play a full part in the social, economic and political life of the country. For purely historical reasons, the original drafting of Section 11

restricted its scope to the needs of "immigrants from the [New] Commonwealth" although this was extended under the Local Government (Amendment) Act 1993 to include all ethnic minorities.

⁹The 'Satanic Verses Affair' refers to the fallout from the publication of Salman Rushdie's fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*. Published in 1988 it was understood by many to be constructed around stories from the life of Muhammad, the title itself referencing Ibn Ishaq's biography of the prophet. Causing some controversy at the time of its publication, the book was interpreted by many Muslims as blasphemous. Following India's lead in banning the book, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a global fatwa that called for the death of Rushdie. In the immediate aftermath, some outbreaks of pandemonium ensued: Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese language translator of the book, was stabbed to death in July 1991; Ettore Capriolo, the Italian language translator, was seriously injured in a stabbing in the same month; and William Nygaard, the Norwegian publisher, survived an attempted assassination in October 1993. In the UK, in January 1989 a large number of Muslims took to the streets of Bradford and publicly burnt copies of the book. Footage from this was duly broadcast on the national news which inadvertently signalled the beginning of a broad process of widespread condemnation and indiscriminate vilification of British Muslims (Allen, 2010).

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