
An-Nisa Society

**Muslim
Voices:
Grassroots
Experiences
of Prevent**

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An-Nisa Society has had a considerable amount of feedback from the Muslim community, which has been overwhelmingly against Prevent. They have recounted disturbing experiences of working on Prevent projects, either as workers in the public sector or as Muslim individuals and community groups involved in projects.

These experiences are shocking in that they reveal the undemocratic and unethical delivery of Prevent, which goes against the democratic principles of our country.

We reproduce some below that are representative of the feedback we have received. We have been asked to keep them anonymous because criticism of Prevent means marginalisation and exclusion from involvement in working for the Muslim community through funding and partnership working opportunities, whereas 'compliant' organisations are facilitated and favoured.

I trust you in maintaining **complete anonymity** as it very difficult to voice dissent for Prevent in this town. Any identification will mean other non-Prevent related work done voluntarily in the community will be affected...I know this sounds a bit paranoid! It's not because I'm afraid of voicing opinions, it's more to do with continuing other useful grassroots work here.

Muslim Worker

I have just read your 'Response' to PVE/Prevent, and was so thrilled to find you articulating things that have been bothering me for a long time. I really wanted to talk to you about what I see happening at the moment in relation to a) the Muslim Faith Leader's Review and b) recruitment and role of Muslim chaplains and c) (to a lesser extent) what's going on in relation to Islamic Studies in HE. PVE is underlying both of the leadership/chaplaincy initiatives, and I have been increasingly shocked and appalled at what I see unfolding. By staying involved with these projects in an advisory or 'steering' capacity, one hopes to change things for the better, and to at least know what's going on, but on the other, involvement might be read as endorsement. On a number of occasions recently, coming from meetings where advice is ignored, and where there is clearly no scope to change the direction, I have been wondering 'what's the point' and I've thought of pulling out.

Muslim University Lecturer

Although I was supposed to be part of the PVE scrutiny board after the first meeting I tried to echo some of your views but didn't bother going back as it paints all Muslims under the same brush. One, which I am not comfortable with.

London Muslim councillor

I just wanted to congratulate you on the Muslim Response to Prevent. I think it says exactly the way we are all feeling about it, but have not been able to formalise it in such a constructive way.

I'm working on PVE in (a London borough) under Community Cohesion, and to be honest, I didn't understand the strategy until I came into post. It immediately raised my own concerns of the agenda, but I was reassured by the council that they are using the PVE agenda for 'capacity building' and promoting civic pride for the Muslim communities in (London borough). However, the framework and nature of the agenda and partnership working with Police etc, contradicts this, even though my work is pre-dominantly working to address the needs of the Muslim Women in our borough. I am worried that by me doing my job, I am showing my acceptance and support for the false labelling of the Muslim community as potential terrorists (no matter how positive the outcomes of my work are).

Muslim Worker – Employed in Prevent funded post in a London council

This report was sent to me via the PREVENT GOSE (Government Office South East) lead and it echoes much of what I have been saying here in (council outside London). However due to various reasons already elaborated on in the report the Muslim community are in denial and failing to speak against this agenda. Thus I was really pleased about this report and have forwarded it to many of my contacts.

Cohesion Advisor (Muslim), Out of London council

The (Prevent Board)...advised by (the local Government Office) were prepared to proceed with the 'Building Resilience Plan' – a plan with a narrative (local context) and associated actions, without it being discussed or agreed.

The absence of shared information and intelligence meant that areas of vulnerability could not be addressed which led to a blanket approach targeting the whole community.

The chair of the group who is the council lead, and the (Prevent Board) as a whole, were reminded repeatedly at the monthly meetings that the issue of local narrative needed to be addressed before the group could proceed. It appeared that this was largely being ignored and that the council wanted to proceed on delivery without meaningful discussion.

Council Officer - North England

Participants (at Prevent projects) whether young or old are not told why they have been invited to the workshop or programme. They are systematically deceived. Most don't have the analytical approach necessary to question the organisers and ask uncomfortable questions like: Who funded this? What are the aims of this session? Where will our feedback go? Why were we invited? If they had an inkling of the Prevent Strategy – in simple terms, many would turn on their heels and head home.

Many localities are doing 'concerts' for the youth. This is supposed to engage them. There is no mention to them what the aims of the programme are.

Muslim Voluntary Group

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Muslim University Lecturer

Trying to engage with any community using 'Prevent Officers' from the police force is the wrong starting place. The Muslim community are being told en masse that they are criminals and they need to liaise with the police to address issues we may, or may not have in our community.

Muslim Voluntary Group

Many of the programmes are aimed at Muslim women. The rationale seems to be they are the focal point of the family; they bring up the children and have influence. All this is true. However, the way the Prevent programmes function is to hone in on Muslim women from deprived areas, who lack qualifications and personal skills. They are then brought in through the doors of parenting, self-improvement, educational opportunities, more involvement in civic life etc. Once through the door, all the training they are given is then linked back to the need for them to improve themselves and their relationship with their children or their kids will become violent extremists. This approach has many problems:

The promotional material is deliberately misleading. Nowhere does it say 'come to this workshop to prevent violent extremism'.

The aims and objectives are false. Even if those delivering the projects believe they are trying to improve the prospects for Muslim women (which is in dire need), they never disclose the real aims, which come from the Prevent strategy.

Most of the women who come from backgrounds with less opportunity and have poor literacy skills. Many can't read or write. Their feedback is taken verbally, it is not objective, boxes are ticked on their behalf and then feedback forms are submitted as 'evidence' of the PVE workshop being a huge success.

Muslim Voluntary Group

Using women's programmes as an example this is clear. Many women invited to workshops are vulnerable. Some come from dysfunctional families or marriages. A high proportion is from the low-income bracket, where husbands are unemployed or doing shift work that doesn't allow for collective family time. These women have baggage. They are pleased to be invited to something local. Many haven't been to a programme where they are served refreshments and lunch and given concrete steps to improve their lives. They feel overwhelmed and obliged to the organisers who sympathise with them. At the end of such a programme it is very easy to procure positive statements from them about the sessions changing their lives and improving their family relations etc etc. There is no doubt they gain something from these sessions. However, they could gain all of this from an entirely different framework, which tackles their grievances. They do not need to come to a PVE workshop to help themselves. Their more fundamental issues of education, mental health, marriage and extended family relationships need addressing first through community development initiatives rather than Prevent.

Muslim Voluntary Group

In our experience the Pathfinder programme delivery was muddled and the Prevent programme promises to be the same. Hazel Blears, Minister assertion that 'local authorities know their communities best' is generally not accurate about their Muslim communities. The councils and agencies involved clearly had little previous engagement with and experience of the Muslim community and its needs. Muslim officers were brought in to front the work, often themselves inexperienced in Muslim-specific work, in order to get the trust of the community. An independent evaluation conducted by the Office for Public Management (OPM) was never made public. We suspect because at the evaluation session with Muslim groups there was a lot of criticism of the government's approach of stigmatising all Muslims as potential terrorists.

There was a lack of transparency and accountability. As a stakeholder, we did not know what was going on across the programme in West London, let alone in the rest of the country. We only met some of the other projects in West London when the year had almost ended. We got the strong impression that the boroughs did not know what they were doing and finding their way. Blunders were being made and money was wasted. Many projects did not start on time because local authorities were floundering with what to do having little knowledge of the Muslim community and due to the lack of capacity in the Muslim voluntary sector - some projects had not even started by the end of the programme. As the funding was not ring fenced, it came to our knowledge that some boroughs swallowed up some of the money to subsidise their deficits elsewhere.

The paranoia about not accidentally funding an extremist group meant that the monitoring arrangements were so ludicrously heavy handed that they placed a great burden on our already under resourced organisation.

The lack of transparency and accountability carries on with the Prevent strategy. Many local authorities are aware that if they were to openly take this Strategy forward there would be an outcry in the Muslim community. So many of them, have avoided public consultations and not involved in the Muslim community. This goes against the guidelines. For example, in (our borough), there has been no public consultation with the Muslim community and its voluntary sector. The Prevent Programme Board has no Muslim voluntary sector representation. In our area, Muslims are so ill informed, under-resourced and badly organised that we cannot make our local authority accountable to the Muslim community for such a sensitive area of work. This is replicated across the country.

Muslim Voluntary Group

Most youth programmes make the assumption that these youth are keen to commit violent extremism – that is simply not true. What most Muslim youth want it is: respect from teachers; an understanding of their heritage; not to be patronised and stereotyped; trust from those in authority; parents to engage with them and understand the world they have to operate in and role models who can inspire them. Some Prevent programmes are addressing these issues, but these issues could just as well be addressed without the ‘violent extremism’ tag attached. These issues are generic to youth from other cultures and they are not taken to PVE workshops to find solutions.

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Many of the (local) leading figures of the Muslim community (in my area) are involved with Prevent: they are well-intentioned people who are devoted to the betterment of the community. But, they are being used to ‘sell’ the Prevent strategy to the community and the Government is using the trust ordinary people have in these figures of authority, to promote its own narrative about Muslims and violent extremism.

Muslim Voluntary Group

Reactions are not being gauged, as there is a flaw in how the Government is receiving feedback. Feedback about the programme is coming from the people who are setting the programmes up. They are the same people who believe their project is making a difference and believe in the necessity for PVE in the first place. They then feed the Government their own, subjective observations on the community reactions – how can the Government evaluate anything from this?

Muslim Voluntary Group

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