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DOI:

[10.7563/SSD_03_01_01](https://doi.org/10.7563/SSD_03_01_01)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Allen, C 2014, 'New Labour's policies to influence and challenge Islam in contemporary Britain: A case study on the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group's Theology Project', *Social Sciences Directory*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 2-19. https://doi.org/10.7563/SSD_03_01_01

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New Labour's policies to influence and challenge Islam in contemporary Britain: A case study on the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group's Theology Project

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Abstract

The creation of the National Muslims Women's Advisory Group (NMWAG) in 2008 by Britain's New Labour Government was part of a strategy which sought to engage different levels of Muslim communities beneath an overarching focus on reducing 'Islamic extremism'. To do so however, Government acknowledged that it would need to support Muslim women to overcome some of the constraints it believed were placed on Muslim women in contemporary Britain. Deeming theology and religious interpretation to be one of those constraints, Government saw the need to empower Muslim women to 'influence and challenge' religious and theological discourses as a priority. This article therefore offers a case study on a project that was commissioned by Government that sought to empower Muslim women to 'influence and challenge' theological interpretations in collaboration with the NMWAG. Having gained unprecedented access to the NMWAG, its activities and engagement with Government, this article presents previously unpublished findings from that project to focus on two key themes: Muslim women, their identity and position; and theology, leadership and the participation of women. Having explored these in detail, this article concludes by critically reflecting on the way in which Government engaged and interacted with Muslim women, the role and relative success of the NMWAG and, most importantly, the extent to which the NMWAG was able to 'influence and challenge' interpretations of Islamic theology.

Keywords: Muslim women; Islam; political engagement; National Muslim Women's Advisory Group; extremist ideologies

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Introduction

For Katherine Brown (2008), Muslim women have been seen as something of a 'missing link' within the dominant British Governmental counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation initiatives of recent years, a topic she notes as having received relatively scant attention. Falling within the realm of such Governmental 'missing link' initiatives was the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group (NMWAG), created in 2008 by Britain's New Labour Government. Established as part of a strategy which sought to engage different levels of Muslim communities, the group sat below a broad policy umbrella that sought to reduce 'Islamic extremism'. Bringing together 19 Muslim women from across Britain who were deemed to have either held positions of leadership or were active within their respective communities, the NMWAG sat within the auspices of the Government's PREVENT policy programme – a policy initiative that sought to prevent violent extremism within Muslim communities following the events of 9/11 but more importantly following the London public transport attacks of 7/7 - and had a broad remit to advise Government via the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG) on issues relating to the empowerment and increasing participation of Muslim women in civic, political and public life (Allen & Guru, 2012). Key to this was the explicit acknowledgement by Government that Muslim women were perceived to be able to 'influence and challenge' extremist ideologies. Whilst so, Government also acknowledged that Muslim women would need to be supported to overcome what it saw as the barriers to greater engagement posed (imposed maybe?) by the religious, theological and cultural constraints placed on Muslim women in contemporary Britain.

To achieve its political aim, Government deemed 'theological understanding' a priority. Given the 19 women invited to join the NMWAG were largely from community as opposed to theological backgrounds (Allen & Guru, 2012), such a priority might have been questionable as regards the capabilities of that particular group. Maybe in recognition of this, DCLG noted how if the NMWAG was to have a positive impact – indeed, if this initiative of PREVENT was to have positive impact – it would need to encourage the greater participation of Muslim women in the structures that shape both religious and theological discourses (Department for Communities & Local Government, 2007). To achieve this, DCLG felt that Muslim women needed to play an equal and active role in their communities from where they would be empowered to duly exert influence in order to ultimately counter extremist messages. Interesting again that Government identified community action and influence as being that through which theological and religious change might occur. Through the NMWAG therefore, DCLG promoted this idea, reasserting religious and theological knowledge and practice as the most effective means through which to achieve this aim (Allen & Guru, 2012) and thereby, the decision to prioritise 'theological understanding'.

Politically contextualising Muslims, women and the NMWAG

DeHanas et al (2010) note how there were a number of reasons underpinning New Labour's interest in engaging 'the faith sector' beyond mere Muslim communities. New Labour

ideology saw faith, faith-based organisations and also individual actors as: generators of civic engagement and so able to contribute to active citizenship and civil renewal agendas; reservoirs of social resource and capital and so able to contribute to a mixed-economy of welfare provision and cohesion; and sources of representation and expertise, able to bridge Government and more hard to reach communities especially those linked to minority religions. Through engaging Muslims, a number of other unique factors also came into play. Whilst Governmental engagement with Muslims was given impetus by the events of 9/11 and 7/7, Muslim communities in Britain were already beginning to attract unprecedented levels of political interest and intervention in their communities, particularly those relating to theological matters and religious institutions (Allen, 2010). This had begun with the introduction of more formal 'Muslim-Government relations' - predominantly male driven and fronted – a number of years beforehand in the late 1990s coinciding with the establishment of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), an organisation Silvestre suggests was a 'privileged interlocutor' and "protégé of New Labour" (Silvestre 2010, 48). Whilst having its critics, especially some who accused it of comprising self-appointed political opportunists with little care or contact with communities (McLoughlin, 2010), the MCB developed into something of a convenient conduit through which Government engaged and consulted Muslim communities, something that became even more important for Government post-9/11 and following the commencement of the 'war on terror' (Amir-Moazami, 2011).

This was an extremely problematic period for Muslims and Muslim organisations looking to engage with Government however. As DeHanas et al (2010) go on, this was apparent through Muslims and their organisations being seen simultaneously as both partners of Government and also bodies of Governmental suspicion. One consequence of this was for Government to prefer 'top-down' interventions in relation to Muslim organisations. What became apparent to Government very quickly however was that Muslim communities – and 'Islam' more importantly – had few of the infrastructures that were evident in the institutionalised churches, the Church of England for example. More worryingly, Government became increasingly concerned about the legitimacy of many of those they were engaging with in terms of their interpretation and use of Islamic theology (DeHanas et al, 2010).

In the aftermath of 7/7, Government decided that many of its male Muslim interlocutors – including the MCB – had failed to 'deliver the goods' thereby necessitating the need to identify new avenues through which to engage Muslim communities but more importantly, to counter the extremism 'problem' (Woodhead, 2010). Having rejected many of the Muslim voices that had previously been politically validated, Britain's New Labour Government moved in two directions: first, by looking towards Muslims themselves to try and identify alternative organisations that might be able to fill the void, the Sufi Muslim Council being an example of one such group; second, to create a number of 'top-down' organisations to fill specific gaps or address specific problems. Worryingly, many of these were, in part at least, funded using counter-terror monies (Allen & Guru, 2012). Such an approach was quite distinct and somewhat unprecedented in terms of Governmental intervention in religious communities. Through this approach, a number of organisations and groups emerged including the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB), the Young Muslim

Advisory Group (YMAG) and Radical Middle Way (RMW) as also the NMWAG. In some ways, the NMWAG was maybe unsurprising. As Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989) note, women have historically and politically been seen as a vehicle for transmitting national and cultural values and so as Allen & Guru (2012) go on, against a backdrop of 9/11, the 'war on terror' and 7/7, the British Government would have increasingly seen Muslim women as a group they could utilise to help forge a community that had Britishness at its core. In order to find a 'solution' for the 'problem' of the radicalisation of young Muslim men therefore, New Labour sought to galvanize the 'rarely heard' voices of Britain's Muslim women (Brown, 2006; Department for Communities & Local Government, 2007).

If Muslim women were to achieve the goals of Government, then that same Government needed to support Muslim women to overcome the barriers it perceived were evident: to reform mosques, to create more spaces for women within them, to encourage greater female participation in the running and management of mosques, and as a priority, to better engage in the shaping and influencing of Islamic theology and its influence on young Muslims. Underpinning this was the Governmental view that through encouraging the support of Muslim women, the state machinery could elicit their support in 'civilising' the 'barbaric' Islamic precept that clashed with Western values and civilization (Allen & Guru, 2012). Little evidence exists however to suggest that this support was forthcoming. Seemingly at no time did Government consider the extent to which the Muslim women co-opted were adequately placed let alone equipped to achieve the task in hand. Instead, Government appeared to be rather more pre-occupied with politicizing the 'problems' it attributed to Muslims and Islam as a means of finding resonance with its wider policy objectives of social inclusion and equal rights. In doing, it was able to justify intervention as entirely necessary and legitimate tool of the state. For Brown (2008), the New Labour Government did so by engineering the situation to project its own liberal, communitarian and multicultural logic onto 'Islam', seen in the way in which Government simplistically demanded greater inclusivity and accountability from mosques as also Muslims more homogenously without ever acknowledging or addressing the significant complexities that Dyke (2009) among others sought to highlight.

Much of this could be seen in Government rhetoric surrounding the creation and subsequent launch of the NMWAG. Two months before its formal launch, Hazel Blears – the then Secretary of State for DCLG – set out how Government saw Muslim women as having an invaluable role at the heart of their families and communities (Department for Communities & Local Government, 2007). For her, Muslim women were uniquely placed to influence and challenge what she described at the time as "the false and perverted ideology spread by extremists [to] give our young people the skills and knowledge to turn their backs on hate" (Department for Communities & Local Government 2007, 3). Using the language of counter-insurgency, Blears spoke of how the NMWAG would be advising Government on its role "in winning hearts and minds and tackling extremism" (Department for Communities & Local Government 2007, 5). 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..." before adding:

“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” (Department for Communities & Local Government 2007, 6)

Underpinning this, and as before, was the explicit acknowledgement that Muslim women would need to be supported to ‘influence and challenge’ extremist ideologies via the prioritisation of encouraging greater female influence in the development of theological understanding. But, and again as before, there is little to suggest that Government had sought to identify Muslim women with the skills and qualities able to undertake the task in hand, if indeed any were available. This of course was an extremely risky strategy as O’Toole et al (2012) rightly note but so too was it reflective of New Labour’s communitarianist ideal that as Driver and Martell (1997) put it, saw “community as the hangover cure to the excesses of Conservative individualism” (1997, 27). However, New Labour’s interventionist approach in relation to Muslim communities had rather more distinct elements than being mere communitarianism. As critics of the PREVENT programme had already stated, one of its more covert objectives was for Government to prompt a substantive change in the attitudes and beliefs of Muslims; possibly even to prompt the creation of an institutionally approved, ‘mainstream’ and ‘moderate’ expression of Islam that would be dually endorsed by various co-opted ‘liberal’ Muslims as also Government itself. As Allen & Guru (2012) note, it is likely that this was part of the impetus for the NMWAG: to challenge dominant expressions of Islam in Britain via the theology that underpinned it, not just those who were deemed ‘radical’. Indeed, this was recognized within Britain’s Muslim communities. Soon after the NMWAG’s launch the MCB publicly accused it of being a vehicle for Government’s spies. Shaista Gohir, the NMWAG’s leader at the time, responded by arguing that “...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).

Soon after its launch, Government took the opportunity to ‘refresh’ the NMWAG’s membership, increasing it from 19 to 26 women. As Allen and Guru (2012) observe, most of the women were already known to Government before their appointment to the NMWAG: for instance, Gohir was a government consultant for PREVENT (Talwar, 2010) whilst Batool Al-Toma was head of the New Muslim Project, an arm of the Islamic Foundation which had received PREVENT funding (2009). Clearly through the NMWAG, Government brought together certain ‘types’ of Muslims. As well as eliciting the support of those Muslim women that had already ‘bought in’ to Government’s policies and approaches – and therefore known to be endorsing the modus operandi - the NMWAG’s membership was also clearly middle-class. For Allen & Guru (2012), this meant that members were well positioned to promote their relatively privileged positions as evidence of what might be achieved by Muslim women albeit without really ever acknowledging or understanding the very real constraints that many Muslim women find are imposed upon them communally, culturally, religiously and politically because of their class status. Whilst some members of the NMWAG might have had contact with Muslim women at the grassroots, this was restricted to a small number of the NMWAG’s members whose interest in the needs and positions of other Muslim women were seemingly always being balanced against expanding their own status

and spheres of influence through which they might increase their own opportunities for both economic and political ends (Allen & Guru, 2012). Consequently when some of the members' efforts to do so were thwarted, a handful sought to highlight the more manipulative policies of Government before eventually excusing themselves from the process.

By the middle of 2010, the NMWAG had become prone to in-fighting thus prompting further personnel changes. Collectively producing a single output – a brochure showcasing 12 British Muslim women deemed 'role models' on the basis that they appeared to work in non-traditional jobs and careers without compromising their religion - the NMWAG's eventual demise was catalysed by the acrimonious public resignation of its leader, Ms Gohir. Dismissing the NMWAG as a 'political fad' (Gohir, 2010b), she argued that the NMWAG served no purpose except contributing towards a political agenda that was about overseeing projects rather than advocating on behalf of Muslim women (Gohir, 2010a). Noting how it was likely a new Government would come to power following the 2010 General Elections, Gohir criticised what she saw as the more cynical members of the NMWAG who suddenly took steps to be more visible and active after a long period of inactivity (2012). She added that this was more akin to the realisation that new friends would need to be made in any incoming Government than as a response to the NMWAG's relative impotence. Directing her ire at the NMWAG, its individual members, the Government and the thinking behind the NMWAG, she questioned the Group's credibility, legitimacy and future viability urging any "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, 2010a).

In the context of the NMWAG's demise, this article offers a case study that critically focuses on one aspect of its remit: to empower and support Muslim women to 'influence and challenge' theological understanding. Adopting a mixed method approach, this article draws upon previously unpublished empirical evidence gathered by a research team – led by the author - that following a successful tendering process, was commissioned by DCLG to work in collaboration with the NMWAG on a project in relation to contemporary theological understanding. As part of the project, members of the research team – both individually and collectively – engaged regularly with members of the NMWAG and DCLG via both face-to-face and electronic modes of communication. Allowing unprecedented access to the NMWAG, its activities as also its engagement with Government, some of the research team maintained diaries to record observations, reflections and thinking. This culminated in a two-day residential workshop that sought to bring together members of the NMWAG with a number of other British Muslim women (selected and agreed by both the NMWAG and DCLG) to debate and discuss the challenges facing British Muslim women who might seek to go about influencing and challenging contemporary interpretations of Islamic theology. Throughout the workshop, all discussions and conversations were recorded and transcribed. At this juncture, all of the discussions were anonymised as is apparent throughout this article. Following the workshops, the research team analysed the transcripts and identified four key themes: Muslim women, their identity and position; theology, leadership and the participation of women; Islamic education and teaching; women's participation in mosques.

Given the focus of this article - to empower and support Muslim women to 'influence and challenge' theological understanding - the findings relating to the first two themes are extensively drawn upon here. Having considered these in detail, this article concludes by critically reflecting on the way in which Government engaged and interacted with Muslim women, the role and relative success of the NMWAG and, most importantly, the extent to which the NMWAG was able to 'influence and challenge' Islamic theological understanding.

Muslim women, their identity and position

At the start of the workshop, participants discussed how British Muslim women might best seek to understand their gender, religion and nationality in the contemporary setting. Whilst keenly discussed, discussions were relatively one-dimensional. As expected, their adherence to the religion of Islam and their more culturally informed sense of Muslim-ness was seen to be something that was both inherent as also central to explaining and understanding who they were (Dwyer, 1999). Participants explained this in different ways however. For some, this was understood in terms of what they perceived was required of them by their religion. So as one participant put it, her identity was indistinguishable from the fundamental tenets and beliefs of Islam:

"What a Muslim is, is all about beliefs, the belief in one God, the prophet, angels, books, fate, life after death..."

Whilst this was very much in line with Mayer's assumption that one might know a Muslim woman by knowing Islam or Islamic law (1995), others understood their identity as being more complex, one that was irreducible to mere beliefs and practices (Brah, 2001). For some, being Muslim was about being inspired by the values evident within the teachings of Islam and how these were upheld and responded to:

"Being a Muslim woman is...being true to myself as a person and being accountable to my faith".

Another responded similarly, albeit with a less emphasis on Islam:

"It's all about how you account for yourself and how you use your talents".

As with this allusion, others were keen to differentiate between being Muslim and the dogmatics of Islam:

"being [a Muslim woman] is more than just theology".

A clear demarcation from Mayer's (1995) acknowledgement was therefore clearly evident among some of the participants. Whilst there was some variation, their identity as a Muslim woman was crucial for all of the participants. They were Muslim, specifically Muslim women,

first and foremost. Consequently, most felt that this needed little debate or question: it was a given that required little explanation or discussion.

What prompted a more nuanced, possibly emotional response was when participants were asked about the roles and responsibilities of a Muslim woman. Participants spoke about a disparity most believed was evident across Britain's Muslim communities, what they termed 'the reality' and the 'theological ideal'. Communicated disparagingly at times, participants described how the reality for many Muslim women was one of being told to listen rather than act; a seemingly prescriptive experience that seemed to reflect the findings of Dwyer's research into young British women in the north of England (1999). As one participant explained:

"Many people are very willing to speak for Muslim women without allowing Muslim women to speak for themselves"

Others described the contemporary role of Muslim women as being one that demanded they be constantly dictated to by men, about what was "...right for us". Not just male scholars she was quick to add, but more commonly from 'ordinary' Muslim men many of whom she believed had little if indeed any scholarly expertise. Focusing on Islamic scholars in particular, participants spoke about the "bizarre" nature of some fatwas and rulings. Examples cited fluctuated between the rather mundane, especially fatwas condemning the plucking eyebrows, to the far more serious and horrific, those seeking to justify female genital mutilation. For many of the participants, there was a view that too many scholars were overly interested in the superficialities of women's lives and behaviours. For those who felt most strongly, when prompted, explained that it was because they thought that male scholars believed they had a "God-given" right to dictate to women. As one participant defiantly declared:

"God defines what I do, not men"

Whilst few were as defiant, a number of participants felt a sense of disconnect from male scholars and imams. Alluded to as opposed to explicitly stated, there was an acknowledgement by some participants of the problem that too many imams in Britain were born overseas which at times, left them unprepared for the contemporary British setting especially in relation the issues of women and young people. Such recognition would appear to be supported by recent evidence which suggests that 97 per cent of imams in Britain are born abroad, 92 per cent of whom are also trained abroad (Dyke, 2009). For participants, this was extremely problematic not least because participants felt that women today needed the right to choose and make decisions themselves. But as most agreed, the reality could be somewhat different. The same participant as before went on to reiterate what she believed some men from within Muslim communities were doing. For her, some were upholding "a patriarchal culture and system..." that seemingly attributed Muslim men a "...God-given right to dictate to women". She illustrated this with anecdotes about how she knew some Muslim girls had been forbidden from travelling alone, had been unduly pressured to marry, and in

some cases, forced to marry. As another participant put it, inadvertently acknowledging what Brown (2006) describes as a 'culturally free Islam', she had one desire as a British Muslim woman:

"just let me be free to go out and be a Muslimah [female Muslim]"

For many participants, there was concern about the way in which debates – both taking place internally as also externally to Muslim communities - repeatedly focused on what the 'role' of a Muslim women was as opposed to what it means to 'be' a Muslim woman. For some, this negated and to some extent de-humanised both the individual and their gender. As one participant explained:

"...being a woman is not a role. Women should be seen as human beings with a capacity for huge things".

Another participant spoke about how this question always needed to be responded to in terms of Islamic scriptures. Referencing Surah Al Nisa (fourth chapter of the Qur'an; translates as 'women'), she explained how this provided a blueprint for women in Islam. Maybe surprisingly, this was responded to by another participant who suggested that Muslim women might need to look beyond scriptures for guidance and knowledge in relation to contemporary social issues. For her, religion and theology was just one facet through which to understand and resolve. This was met with some contestation from those in attendance. For one participant, it was vital that Muslim women did not lose sight of the guiding principles of Islam. As she retorted:

"The Qur'an is guidance"

For her, the Qur'an spoke both about and to men and women equally. For her, the beauty of returning to the Qur'an was that it was rather more "pure" in that it did not prefer or privilege one or other gender. Consequently, its guidance needed to be heeded rather than sidelined. As she elaborated, theology had to be the frame through which Muslim women were duly guided and informed.

Other participants sought a more balanced approach. For them, whilst acknowledging the vital role that scholars play in relation to interpreting the Qur'an, sunnah (practices of the Prophet Muhammad) and hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) for them as ordinary Muslims, they did feel that some scholars sought to offer little more than a reductive list of mere 'do's and don'ts' that Muslim women were expected to comply to. If they did, then they would be congratulated as being a 'good' Muslim woman; if they did not, then they would be criticized for being a 'bad' Muslim woman. One participant stated her desire to be free of dichotomous situations that forced her to pander to the expectations of religious scholars. As she explained, this was because they:

"inhibit me as a person from expressing myself and being creative".

Another agreed:

“in a religious framework I feel locked out – I am who I am”.

Such comments resonated with the scholarly research which suggests that Muslim women in today's Britain do indeed encounter barriers that restrict their participation in civic, political and public life (Ali, 1992; Werbner, 2000; Ahmed, 2001).

Amongst the participants, there was consensual support amongst the participants that to bring about change, to overcome the barriers Muslim women face, Muslim women were likely to need support whether external or otherwise. Unsurprisingly, most participants thought it would be of benefit to Muslim women if Government provided this, not least in helping them to establish spaces where Muslim women might be able to at least begin to influence and challenge the theological interpretations that for many, were seen to justify such barriers. The importance attributed to influencing and challenging theological interpretations and justifications as also a good number of male Islamic scholars were clearly evident amongst the participants. For some, there was the need to challenge what Brown (2006) describes as the seepage of cultural forms and norms into the religion, theology and practice of Islam. For some, this was evident in what they saw to be the male dominated and patriarchal cultural systems within Muslim communities rather more than within the religion of Islam itself. But as one participant explained, the very nature of Islam was crucial to a better understanding of the problems facing Muslim women. As she went on, Islam for her was unlike other religions in that it was seen to be far more pervasive and so theological understanding had to be instructive in all aspects of everyday life for both men and women alike. For her, improving and challenging theology was therefore the only means through which any change could be justified and prompted by. Without it, change would be superficial or seen to be being imposed externally, from outside the religion of Islam. From this, two questions emerged. First, how then might Muslim women be best – or at least better - placed to engage in the process of shaping and interpreting Islamic theological understanding; second, how might Muslim women gain a better Islamic scholarly education in order to do so?

Theology, leadership and the participation of women

To be better positioned to influence and challenge theological understanding, participants agreed that Muslim women needed to find spaces within existing theological and educational structures and processes. In the contemporary British setting, such spaces seem to fall under two broad headings (Mandeville, 2007). The first exists within the mainstream via Islamic theology undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered by a number of British universities. Some go beyond this, the University of Cardiff for instance which has a centre dedicated to teaching about Islam – including Islamic theology – specifically in the context of today's Britain. The second tends to sit outside the educational mainstream and is more reflective of the Islamic scholarly tradition. Such spaces might take the form of regular classes held in a mosque or Islamic centre as also private institutions that provide more

formal and traditional Islamic education. The first of these might more commonly be referred to as a madrassah (school; in contemporary British setting typically refers to after-school classes held in a mosque or Islamic centre), the latter a darul uloom (house of knowledge; in the contemporary British setting typically refers to a specialist Islamic school, college or other educational institution) although this would also normally infer the level of study was somewhat more advanced. At this advanced level, a number of private Islamic colleges across Britain are currently offering programmes of traditional Islamic scholarship. Whilst participants acknowledged these different spaces, they also acknowledged how mainstream institutions such as universities were rarely attributed with the same levels of authenticity or authority as madrassahs and darul uloom. This was seen to be problematic because as participants highlighted, these latter spaces were thought to exist despite the near complete exclusion of women's influence from them. For some, this was a particular shame because as a number of participants explained, revisiting Islam's history presented a sometimes quite different picture to how things looked contemporarily. Most commonly spoken about was Aisha who many of the participants thought should be promoted as an example to any Muslim men who sought to undermine women in the present setting. For participants, Aisha was not only a wife of the Prophet Muhammad but so too a strong-minded and independent woman who was renowned for questioning Muhammad (Ahmed, 1986). As many agreed, this provided necessary and clear evidence that women had always had the right to question and challenge men. One participant responded by saying that Aisha's example as recorded in hadith was evidence that:

"every Muslim is a free agent and has the ability to reclaim space within the body of interpretation".

Whilst agreeing, some participants suggested the need for realism and that perceiving everyone as "free agents" or on a par with Aisha were overly simplistic and decidedly utopian. More pressing for some was, in line with Ali (1992) and Dwyer (1999), the sheer inability of Muslim women to even begin to question scholars let alone Islamic theology and its interpretation. For another, a scarcity of theological engagement that sought newer or alternative interpretations both within and for contemporary life was equally problematic. From discussions, many alluded to the need to overcome what one described as the "black and white mentality" that permeated and detrimentally shaped the thinking of some Muslims:

"Everything is right or wrong, black or white, halal or haram [permitted or non-permitted]. Your conscience should tell you what to do".

For some, and as mentioned when discussing identity, there was a fear that constantly framing everything theologically especially in a polarised, 'black or white' manner would be counter-productive, resulting in some Muslims and their communities constantly looking backwards and so reinforcing the stereotypical view of wider society that Islam was a monolithic, static and unchanging religion (Commission on British Muslims & Islamophobia,

1997). Some were quick to add that this was even more dangerous given they believed many politicians felt similar. Such views were seen to be extremely detrimental as they prevented Muslims from dealing with the issues that were relevant to their lives and experiences today quite irrespective of gender. As one simply put it:

“we need to take our heads out of the sand and have a look around”.

Discussions again returned to what was seen to be the urgent need for more realistic interpretations of Islamic theology. While some participants questioned the extent to which this could ever take place within existing scholarly structures others were rather more radical, asking whether a time would ever come when it might be necessary for Muslim women to withdraw or break from tradition in order to create and develop new and vibrant spaces. A handful of participants suggested this was likely the only eventual option; to establish themselves outside the norms and constraints of the Islamic ‘mainstream’ as a means of initiating and embedding change. However, these discussions brought about some consternation and disagreement. Most controversially, some questioned whether in the contemporary setting Islamic theology was even necessary let alone the best means through which to try and engineer change. This was strongly contested by a number of participants, one vociferously warning against unnecessarily:

“throwing the baby out with the bath water”

As some went on, they feared that such radical statements and ideas would see them being labelled or stereotyped. From the collective experience, many spoke about how existing female theologians that had tried to work within existing structures had repeatedly found themselves being described by male theologians as indeed ordinary Muslims, both male and female, as “feminists”. Accentuating the pejorative use of the term, some suggested its appropriation was little more than an insult. Of those identified as having been subjected to such labels participants spoke about female theologians such as Fatema Mernissi and Amina Wadood. For some, there was an even more insidious message underpinning the label of ‘feminist’. As one participant explained, the term was used in such a way that it demarcated:

“the feminists - the products of the West - from proper Muslim women – the true believers”.

Unlike the ‘products of the West’, these ‘true believers’ were the Muslim women who “knew their place” as one participant explained. Untainted by the West and its ideologies, those who ‘knew their place’ were also the ‘good’ Muslim women referred to previously. Demarcating ‘feminists’ from ‘good’ Muslim women was also seen to be a means through which both communities and scholars sought to shut down debates any issues many would prefer to ignore or keep under wraps. For some of the participants, this was evidence that necessary debates about today’s key issues, especially those relating to Muslim women, could be immediately stopped by even the merest inference by a male scholar that those wanting the debates were:

“misguided and on the wrong path”.

The demarcation of ‘true’ from ‘tainted’, ‘good’ from ‘bad’, whether inadvertent or otherwise, was roundly acknowledged as something that was extremely powerful. So much so that one participant suggested it was very easy for scholars to argue that those who they deemed to be on:

“the wrong path...were no longer seen to be Muslims”.

Such approaches are far from new, as Kiloran’s (1988) research in Cyprus shows. What was maybe more interesting though was how such polarised approaches were being used within Muslim communities at a time when Government was itself using similar polarised approaches to differentiate ‘good’ from ‘bad’ Muslims more generally and in particular, politically (Kiloran, 1988; Mamdani, 2002; Engle, 2004; Maira, 2009).

What emerged therefore was something of a paradox. If Muslim women needed to employ theology to challenge and overcome the barriers that were seen to restrict them, they would then need to be able to engage in the process of studying and subsequently interpreting theology as a means of gaining authority and legitimacy. However, if those same Muslim women were to gain that authority and legitimacy, then they would need to have done so through participating in the formal study of Islamic theology, the activity that the majority of participants identified as presenting them with the greatest barrier. The realization being that it was going to be even more difficult for women to acquire the authority and legitimacy needed to even begin to engage in theological and scholarly debates let alone seek to shape and influence them in order to bring about any necessary change. With this, many of the participants became increasingly pessimistic in their outlook. Discussing the deeply embedded gender dynamics in some parts of Muslim communities in Britain and elsewhere, some began to suggest that the task facing them was insurmountable. And as some noted, even the discussions being undertaken were potentially problematic. For them, such discussions would be seen as not only posing a threat to the religion of Islam but so too the masculinity of Muslim men. For change to occur therefore participants concluded there would need to be a significant shift in widespread attitudes and opinions within Muslim communities about Muslim women and not just about their participation as scholars. The question then was would the NMWAG, even with Government’s support, ever be able to achieve this?

Evaluating change, evaluating success

At the outset of the workshops as indeed when the NMWAG was established, there was widespread consensus amongst participants of the need to influence and challenge Islamic theology in the contemporary British setting as a priority issue. Similarly, that Governmental support for Muslim women would be necessary to ensure they became empowered agents of change. As with Gohir’s (2008) rebuttal previously, members of the NMWAG and its

supporters had been very quick to dismiss anyone seeking to undermine this consensus. Yet as the project progressed, especially following the workshop, what became increasingly evident was a collective realisation that such a consensus might be a far more difficult and complex task than either the Government or NMWAG had initially envisaged. As emerged from the discussions, this was evident in the paradoxical nature of the acquisition of authority and legitimacy, something that some perceived as being insurmountable. So much so that throughout the lifespan of the project, no constructive, pragmatic or practical suggestions were voiced to the research team by the NMWAG that would provide the necessary impetus to even begin such a process. Consequently, no actual impetus emerged and the NMWAG was left impotent in terms of influencing and challenging Islamic theology and its understanding.

Focusing on the process of influencing and challenging in isolation might however be problematic given that such a project did not occur in a policy or political vacuum. In terms of the NMWAG as a vehicle through which Government might engineer if not exact power, it was initially conceived that with Governmental support the NMWAG would more widely seek to empower Muslim women to increase their participation in all aspects of civic, political and public life in contemporary Britain. As ambassadors and role models, the NMWAG were charged with communicating with the wider public – indeed, as much as they were Muslim communities – positive stories about what British Muslim women would be able to achieve if given the right support and opportunities. Retrospectively, there is little doubt that a significant disparity was evident between what might be described as the aspirations of the NMWAG and its actual achievements. For Allen and Guru (2012), the NMWAG was indeed the ‘political fad’ of Gohir’s voicing, offering no real or meaningful sense of political empowerment to anyone. As they explained, creating a specific group of Muslim women using a ‘top-down’ political interventionist approach that was so unclear in its justification, creation, membership and development was bound to divide and ultimately disappoint. As they went on, even the women who were co-opted were left questioning their own viability and legitimacy when it became apparent that the NMWAG had comprehensively failed.

Whilst the constraints of this article do not allow for a full comparative analysis of the NMWAG with other similar bodies that emerged around the same time, future research might seek to explore the impact of the NMWAG alongside the respective impacts – positive or negative - of those such as MINAB or YMAG. Nonetheless, some cursory comparisons can be seen in relation to the NMWAG and Radical Middle Way (RMW). As an initiative that received Governmental backing around the same time as the NMWAG, RMW’s objectives in relation to challenging and influencing theological interpretation were decidedly similar albeit without gender specificity. As with the NMWAG, Jones notes how RMW was from its inception firmly entangled in what he describes as New Labour’s efforts to “re-make the Islamic tradition in Britain” (Jones 2013, 558). In addition, this incorporated the embedding of a Governmentally informed demarcation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims as also the ‘wives and mothers’ who would mollify the more ‘combative masculine’ forms of Islam (Jones, 2013). Unlike the NMWAG however, RMW did not receive funding from PREVENT monies directly. For Jones, this was important because once in receipt of PREVENT monies, it

was considered that there was a downplaying of the creative agency of the people involved. For RMW therefore, this was not the case and so as an organization and as individuals within it, there was a greater sense of freedom and creativity. An example of this can be seen in how RMW was able to reach out to and engage with a wide range of different British and international scholars, one of the most successful being an event in Bradford featuring the American scholar Hamza Yusuf which attracted around 5,000 attendees (approximately 1.5 per cent of the city's entire population) (Jones, 2013).

Maybe more relevant however is the way in which Jones considers the role and function, as also the impact and relative success of RMW. In doing so he stresses how it was not a traditional institution at which students spent many years seeking to study the various intricacies of Islamic theology even though those who participated in RMW events and activities were indeed exposed to Islamic theology. Jones explains how RMW created spaces outside of those traditionally preferred for Islamic scholarship in particular the internet to share and disseminate theology and its understanding. In doing so, those who were interested were able to 'dip' into and out of a whole range of different lectures, sermons and teachings which at times at least, offered alternative theological interpretations to the maybe more extreme and orthodox (Jones, 2013). In doing so, RMW used the technology available to it to overcome (some) of the barriers that were identified by the NMWAG as existing in contemporary British Muslim communities. Resonating with this, Jones (2013) adds how RMW went beyond simply stressing the importance of maintaining existing traditions by really engaging and communicating the message that today there was a very real need to rework and re-evaluate that same tradition. Unlike RMW which preferred externality, engagement and communication, the NMWAG preferred something quite different. Whether this was as Gohir and others suggested, a consequence of the fact that the NMWAG's members had already bought into the Government's modus operandi remains open to question. But from observations of the workings and interactions of the NMWAG, there was a clear sense of insularity that in the opinion of the research team was more about protecting and expanding their own statuses and spheres of influence thereby necessitating them to safeguard themselves and their own positions.

And such a strategy was extremely problematic as both the NMWAG and its members found out. Allying their interests so closely with Government meant that the Muslim women who became members of the NMWAG were on something of a slippery slope, one that saw them charged and accused in relation to a number of different issues from a number of different sources. From traitors to their communities to Government colluders, most relevant to the focus of this article was that some of the NMWAG's members were called Western feminists or were Muslims who had been seduced by Western feminism's charms. For Brown (2006), the NMWAG was evidence of "the instrumental use of gender by Government..." which, as she went on, "...had the impact of relegating Muslim women's political activism to a sideshow. Muslim women's political activism [was] being scripted". In fairness, the NMWAG was extremely complex. In the perception of Government, Muslim women were those who were socially down-trodden, who in the most homogenous understanding were also perceived to be victims of the constraints placed on them by their religion and culture. In seeking to offer support, to empower a handful of individuals that had seemingly been able

to break free of those same religious and cultural constraints and more importantly, had bought into New Labour's political agenda, Government was clearly acting within the extremely narrow perspective of its own policies in ways that one might doubt would have been used in relation to other religions. Nonetheless, it afforded New Labour the justification and validation to intervene in an area that it comprehensively failed to understand. For Government, the creation of the NMWAG and its desire to influence and challenge theological interpretations was done as a means through which it sought to appropriate and project its own liberal, communitarian and multicultural logic onto 'Islam'. Because of this, the resultant failure of the NMWAG prompted two distinct consequences. First, that even with Government support, the NMWAG was unable to initiate change and so failed to deliver any of the outcomes asked of it. Second, in doing so they went some way towards reinforcing Government as also wider society's view that Muslim communities were backward, retrogressive and forever resistant to change.

Through the particular project of seeking to influence and challenge theological interpretations, similar conclusions emerge. But unlike previously when it was Muslim communities that were seen to be resistant and unchanging, here the same conclusions can be seen as regards the religion of Islam also. For New Labour, Islam and its theology was seen as something of an opportunity space, one that perceived to be both politicised and undoubtedly problematized also. Whilst one might speculate, it would seem clear that New Labour consciously and deliberately sought to exact influence, directly challenge and ultimately change British Islam (Brown, 2008; Allen & Guru, 2012; Jones, 2013). Similar speculation might also be suggested as regards the establishment of a state endorsed 'mainstream' Islam that would have been given credibility and legitimacy through the co-option of various 'liberal' Muslims. Reiterating O'Toole et al's (2012) observation, Governmental involvement was undoubtedly a risky strategy. Further evidence of this can be seen in the way in which the NMWAG and its theology project were funded using Governmental budgets established to prevent extremism and terrorism as also how the language of counter-insurgency was preferred in order to justify it (Allen & Guru, 2012).

In spite of many of these issues, what became obvious – and was also the most likely cause for the NMWAG and project's failure – was the fact that Government as also the co-opted Muslim women bought into the belief that a top-down interventionist approach was able to bring about change in relation to Islam, its theology and how theology impacts both within and on Muslim communities. Given that all involved failed to acknowledge the reality that the mainstream political establishment was almost entirely disconnected from the religious and the theological spaces, whether mainstream or the more extreme fringe, so both the NMWAG and the theology project were doomed to failure from the start. If the politicians failed to acknowledge this, one might have thought that those co-opted by Government should have been tangibly aware of this, recognizing the sharp divide that exists between the secular and the religious, the sacred and profane. Again, the top-down interventionist approach as also the counter terrorism monies should have at least alerted some. Likewise also none of those who were co-opted had any evidence of ever having any traditional theological education, training or recognised knowledge – thereby lacking Islamic scholarly

credibility, authority and legitimacy – the inevitable failings should have been apparent if not obvious.

For social, communal and theological change to occur, that is driven and given impetus by theological re-interpretation, it can surely only ever occur from 'within' the structures and processes that have the necessary influence and impact: something that is organic and internal. As this project shows, no matter how much pressure would appear to be exerted externally – particularly from within the political spaces – it seems highly unlikely that this will significantly influence change within the religious and theological spaces if those operating and functioning – and more importantly, holding the necessary power and influence - neither want it nor are prepared to allow it. From the findings of this study, it is unclear as to what extent those with the power and influence want change and more saliently, to what extent they would be prepared for that change to occur.

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