Constructing the 'good Muslim girl': Hegemonic and pariah femininities in the British Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) agenda

Leonie B. Jackson

Department of Social Sciences, Northumbria University, UK.

Room 226, Lipman Building,
Northumbria University,
Newcastle upon Tyne,
NE1 1ST, UK.
leonie2.jackson@northumbria.ac.uk

Author details

Leonie B. Jackson is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Northumbria University, UK. She is the author of The Monstrous and the Vulnerable: Framing British Jihadi Brides (Hurst & Co., 2021) and Islamophobia in Britain: The Making of a Muslim Enemy (Palgrave, 2018).
Abstract
Since the rise of Islamic State (IS) in 2014, British Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) policy, Prevent, has increasingly focused on the appeal of jihadist ideology to Muslim girls. This article considers the case of the Bethnal Green girls, who migrated to IS territory in February 2015. Using the concepts of hegemonic and pariah femininities, it shows how gender intersects with religion, race, and class in British PVE to construct the ’good Muslim girl’ as both an aspirational figure that young Muslim women should seek to emulate and the norm against which signs of radicalisation can be measured. The article concludes that the articulation of this neoliberal subject via PVE is deeply problematic in theory and practice: gendering the ‘signs’ of radicalisation, offering neoliberal solutions that fail to account for intersectional structural oppressions and disciplining pariah Muslim femininities in excessive ways.

Introduction
In February 2015 three Muslim schoolgirls from Bethnal Green Academy, Kadiza Sultana (16), Amira Abase (15) and Shamima Begum (15), left London during the half-term break and travelled to Syria to join Islamic State (IS). The departure of the Bethnal Green girls and other young women to IS territory during the mid-2010s led to a repositioning of counterterrorism, based on fears that British Muslim girls were being ‘groomed’ by IS militants in Syria. Initially focussed on young Muslim men, Britain’s Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) policy, Prevent, was reoriented towards dissuading young girls from leaving the country.

Previous research has centred Prevent’s gendered dimensions, demonstrating how it has approached Muslim women in their family roles as moderating influences (Brown 2008; Rashid 2014). More recent studies have considered the specific campaigns aimed at dissuading Muslim girls from joining IS (Andrews 2020; Brown
2019), along with the extension of surveillance into homes and schools (Mirza 2015; Fernandez 2018), and the construction of Muslim girlhood through PVE discourse (Mirza and Meetoo 2013; Rashid 2016).

The present article contributes to this literature by interrogating the ways PVE has instrumentalised subjectivities as a means of both discouraging and discerning radicalisation in girls. To illustrate these problems, I use the case of the Bethnal Green girls. Much of the scholarly work on these three young women has drawn on gender, using it as a lens through which to understand their radicalisation (Cook and Vale 2018; Saltman and Smith 2015), the media reporting of their departure (Zarabadi and Ringrose 2018; Shaban 2020; Jackson 2021b) and the new legal norms developing to deal with potential returnees (Almutawa and Walker 2022; Masters and Regilme 2020).

The Bethnal Green girls offer a useful case study through which to interrogate these issues. The ways in which gendered, religio-racialised and classed identities are employed to discipline subjects through PVE, I argue, are particularly pronounced in this case, and can help us to understand the intersectional landscape of British PVE as well as the pitfalls of the approaches used. Further, their case has been heavily publicised from their disappearance in early 2015, to the location of Shamima Begum as the ‘caliphate’ fell in 2019. As a result, publicly available data exists for this case that is not available in other high-security cases and this allows the tracing of discourses over time. I draw on a range of such data in this article, including newspaper articles on the three, the Home Affairs Committee Inquiry on their disappearance (10 March 2015), the evidence presented to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Trafficked Britons in Syria (2021) and the Begum vs Home Secretary cases at the UK Supreme Court (2021). My interest here is not to parse the truth from these accounts (many of which contradict one another), but to use the theoretical lens of hegemonic/pariah femininities
to interrogate the way PVE discourse at various sites has constructed knowledge about these young women and to demonstrate the limitations and dangers of contemporary gendered PVE policy.

To do this, I use the concepts of hegemonic and pariah femininities (Schippers 2007) and Mirza and Meetoo’s (2013; 2018) work on the ‘good Muslim girl’ to argue that PVE discourse offers a specific form of idealised Muslim femininity, modelled on hegemonic neoliberal white femininity, that serves and upholds the social order in the UK and seeks to make young women governable. Standing in opposition to this are pariah femininities, enactments of problematic religio-racialised identities that are understood to hinder Muslim girls’ integration. These performances are not only understood as threats to the social order (as all pariah femininities are), but they also serve as potential indicators of radicalisation, requiring social surveillance and state intervention to ensure that they are disciplined and subdued.

I begin by discussing hegemonic and pariah femininities, and how these concepts merge with neoliberal subjectivities to construct an idealised Muslim femininity, before moving to discuss how Prevent has engaged (and instrumentalised) gendered intersectional identities in its work to quell radicalisation. I then move on to outline three key problems with the construction of Muslim girlhood in the British PVE agenda, using the Bethnal Green girls’ case to illustrate these limitations: first, that the wielding of hegemonic and pariah femininities through PVE discourse and policy genders the ‘signs’ of radicalisation so that suspicion and risk is read through dominant ideas of how Muslim girls are supposed to behave. Second, that the subjectivities offered to young Muslim girls as a buffer against radicalisation are potentially counterproductive, promising race-, religion- and class-blind success which cannot be delivered and failing to account for the possibility that radical ideologies may offer the
agential subject an alternative to these empty promises. Third, that the coercive power of the counterterrorism state means that enactments of pariah femininities become profoundly dangerous for Muslim women and girls.

**Hegemonic and pariah femininities**

Hegemonic gender practice offers a lens through which we can view and analyse other practices within the public sphere, including counterterrorism. Gender hegemony directs attention to how ‘common sense’ performances of masculinity and femininity work within other socio-cultural hierarchies to construct legitimate and illegitimate subjectivities.

Hegemonic masculinity has received the most attention in this regard, understood as a culturally idealised way of performing masculinity that legitimises the patriarchal order to guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell 2005, 77; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Attention to femininities within this literature initially extended only to ‘emphasised femininities’, performances of womanhood that enact compliance with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005, 184–85), however, subsequent work has argued for the need to recover femininity in theories of gender hegemony. In an influential article, Mimi Schippers (2007) argued that hegemonic masculinity requires that women reinforce it, and that this is not merely emphasised, but in fact hegemonic, femininity: the performing of gender in a ‘womanly’ way that upholds the patriarchal order. Schippers particularly draws attention to the role of deviant performances of femininity, where women who behave in ways reserved for men (e.g. by desiring women or being violent or aggressive) are subjected to social sanction (Schippers 2007, 95). Because these challenge hegemonic masculinity and work against the gender order, she argues they are not subordinate, but
pariah: undermining the strict separation of gendered performances upon which patriarchal power rests.

These concepts highlight the ways performances of femininity can both uphold and undermine patriarchy. However, this approach has been criticised for its monocategorical focus on the gender order and its lack of attention to the fact that subordinated gendered subjects can - and do - enact hegemonic power over other subordinated subjects to legitimate other social dominations in the matrix of power (Collins and Chepp 2013; Hamilton et al. 2019).

Patricia Hill Collins’s intersectional framing conceptualises hegemonic masculinity’s power as simultaneously upholding other axes of power, including racial, class, and heterosexual domination (Collins 2004, 186). From this perspective, femininity is central to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, and certain performances of femininity – which legitimate domination - provide women with access to power on other axes of the matrix of oppression. White, middle class and heterosexual women, in their performances of hegemonic femininity, may therefore enact power over subordinated others (Shepherd 2022).

The question of whether Muslim women can ever have access to hegemonic femininity is an important one. Given that hegemonic femininity is understood as the complement to hegemonic masculinity, upholding a gendered, religio-racialised, classed, and heterosexual order, how can Muslim women ever access this when privilege is ‘baked in’ to these ideals?

Returning to Gramsci’s (1971, 80) conception of hegemony, from which these theories derive, is helpful here. As Hamilton et al explain:

Hegemony need not rely on violence or coercion, nor does it require individuals to perfectly embody cultural ideals. Rather, hegemony is about how discourse, practices, and relationships become instantiated in institutional and organizational arrangements, collectively channelling individuals toward conformity. (Hamilton et al. 2019, 317).
Hegemony as a means of naturalising domination through discourse and social practice favours consent rather than coercion (although this always waits in the wings), and it is this mechanism of domination that defines hegemonic gender orders, rather than any pregiven masculine or feminine qualities (Yang 2020, 319). It is important therefore to separate the *performance* of hegemonic femininities (which is a form of agency) from the *construction* of hegemonic femininities (instantiated by the naturalised, normalising, and internalised social forces that channel valued performances of femininity).

Hegemonic femininities are thus not reducible to category membership (Hamilton et al. 2019, 328), they should, rather, be understood as cultural modes of aspiration against which women are expected to measure themselves (Paechter 2018, 124).

My argument here is not that a route to hegemonic femininity is necessarily open to Muslim women, but that they are *offered* a subjectivity that emulates it, as a means of governing and regulating the forms of Muslim femininity deemed acceptable in society. It is in the interests of power to encourage consent for the social order by constructing and rewarding valued forms of femininity, even (and perhaps especially) to those whose marginalised position in matrices of intersectional domination means they can never meet its standards. We can understand the operation of this power by considering the gendered construction of neoliberal subjectivity in the present historical moment.

**Neoliberal subjectivity and the ‘good Muslim girl’**

Neoliberalism as a socio-economic system has many meanings, but involves the fetishisation of competition, market fundamentalism, the withdrawal of the welfare state, an emphasis on individual responsibility, and an understanding of people as consumers, all of which become embedded into everyday life to transform ‘common
sense’ and the way humans relate to the world and develop their identities (Houghton 2019, 616–17). The form of subjectivity valued under this system is one which internalises the values of competition, entrepreneurialism, individual responsibility, self-management and self-monitoring (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis 2017, 355).

Several scholars have noted how young women are positioned as ideal neoliberal subjects, encouraged to take advantage of new empowered femininities by pursuing education, careers, economic independence and consumer culture (McRobbie 2007; Walkerdine 2003; Budgeon 2011). Through this subjectivity they are offered a means of transcending the impediments of their structural position in gendered, raced, and classed hierarchies, through effort and hard work. Failure to achieve success is removed from the structural conditions in which individuals find themselves and ascribed instead to individual deficiency: a failure to work hard enough, to market oneself cleverly enough, or to consume the right products. All young women are told they have the same opportunities for success, irrespective of their structural position (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis 2017, 360), and in this way, neoliberal ideology works with and through intersectional matrices of power, including gender hegemonies, to uphold the social order. As with neoliberal success, the most marginalised will not achieve hegemonic femininity, but it is in the interests of power to offer a socially valued way of being a Muslim woman as a means of enabling hegemonic power to operate through consent, while at the same time reserving coercion for those whose pariah performances threaten the social order.

Schippers has argued that identifying pariah femininities is the best way of understanding what forms of femininity are hegemonic in any given context. Because pariah femininities challenge and threaten to contaminate the social order, they must be stigmatised and subdued through social sanction (Schippers 2007, 96). From this
perspective, Muslim femininities in the UK and elsewhere clearly stand as threatening to the social order. Veiled women, particularly those who cover their face, visibly operate agential control over their sexuality in the refusal to submit to the demands of the male gaze that female bodies be on show, which in turn identifies them with Islam, itself understood as dangerous, threatening and contaminating to the social order (Razack 2022, 103). That these pariah femininities are interpreted as defiant adherence to an alternative and dangerous set of socio-cultural values, threatening both to the gender order and to Western socio-political orders more broadly, is clear from the coercive social sanctions directed at visibly Muslim women, who are subjected to street harassment and violence, as well as state demands for conformity (Parveen 2019; Lambert and Githens-Mazer 2010). All of these forms of social control operate to subjugate pariah femininities and put Muslim women ‘back in their place’. But hegemony does not operate by coercion alone, the working of this form of power requires that individuals are offered something to which they can consent, in order to contain, control, and pacify the dangerous potential of pariah forms.

The forms of Muslim femininity valued and encouraged at the present moment urge Muslim women to overcome the barriers of gender, religion, culture, race, and class, by emulating hegemonic femininity. Through neoliberal discourses, forms of subjectivity are offered that promise the possibility of achieving success by internalising key neoliberal values, including rationality, autonomy, responsibility, and entrepreneurship (Türken et al. 2016, 36). These discourses and repertoires outline valued identities by rewarding and encouraging certain ways of being while censuring and/or sanctioning others, operating as disciplining technologies that serve to channel identities towards more palatable forms of Muslim femininity for the maintenance of social order.
Schools are key sites at which these discourses and repertoires operate to outline valued identities, by rewarding and encouraging certain ways of being while censuring and/or sanctioning others in order to channel identities to more palatable forms of Muslim femininity for the maintenance of social order. Mirza and Meetoo (2018) have traced the ways Muslim schoolgirls are channelled into these subjectivities by white middle class teachers who operate according to essentialist ideas about the correct way to enact Muslim femininity via the ‘good Muslim girl’ subjectivity. Working on the assumption that Muslim girls were subjected to patriarchal cultural surveillance in their communities, teachers positioned the school as an egalitarian meritocratic space where girls could excel academically, rising above their cultural and class impediments to achieve success. They argue that this articulation of neoliberal femininity has been offered to young Muslim women as a means of emancipating them from what supposedly holds them back: religion, culture, and family (Mirza and Meetoo 2018, 228). Rashid has located the ideal good Muslim girl in the figure of Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, as a poster girl for empowerment, representing the oppressed girl who rose above her subordination through education, determination, and entrepreneurial spirit (Rashid 2016, 255–56). This version of the correct way to enact Muslim femininity, Mirza argues, is wielded by teachers in their regulation of Muslim girls, and if girls stray from this they are subjected to social control (Mirza 2015, 41).

The construction and control of ‘good Muslim girls’ may be understood through the framework of hegemonic and pariah femininities, where a specific form of idealised femininity is offered to Muslim women that encourages and rewards ‘moderate’ Islamic articulations and is modelled on hegemonic neoliberal white femininities that emphasise achievement, empowerment, and choice within pre-defined parameters of acceptability.
This theoretical framework offers a lens through which to analyse PVE discourse and practice, directing attention to hegemonic femininity as a form of raced, classed, and heteronormative power, and to enactments of pariah femininities as potentially dangerous to the maintenance of social order. This has become increasingly entangled with counterterrorism agendas following the introduction of the Prevent Duty into British schools, where deviations from ‘British values’ are read as possible indicators of radicalisation (Winter et al. 2022). If girls display pariah femininities, by showing ‘excessive’ interest in their religion or in foreign policy, they are potentially in danger of falling under the remit of Prevent. These insights highlight the need to understand how PVE discourses incorporate gendered understandings of radicalisation that rely on religio-racialised and class-based ideas about which subjects are ‘vulnerable’ to radical ideologies. Analysing the way that the PVE agenda articulates gender and endorses or sanctions particular gendered ways of being is thus impossible without considering the intersections of religion, race, and class that come together to construct acceptable ways of being a ‘good British citizen.’ The following section traces how gendered PVE discourse in Britain has developed, drawing out the intersectional matrices of power that it rests upon and rearticulates.

**Gendering Prevent**

British counterterrorism policy, CONTEST, has four strands, each dealing with a different aspect of counterterrorism: prevent, pursue, protect, and prepare. Prevent seeks to stop people becoming terrorists, and has been subject to several revisions since it was first made public in 2007, including changes in focus (from preventing terrorism (2007) to preventing violent extremism (2011)), a broadening of the strategy from a focus solely on ‘Islamist extremism’ (2007) to other security risks (2011), and the requirement
for public sector professionals to monitor and report those in their care for signs of radicalisation (2018) (HM Government 2008; 2011; 2018). The approach, however, has remained basically the same: to prevent terrorism by dissuading people from radical ideologies.

Since Prevent initially focused only on ‘Islamist extremism,’ it has been deeply criticised for approaching Muslims as ‘suspect communities’ (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009) and for the representation of ‘homegrown’ terrorism as at least partly resulting from insufficient integration of Muslims into British society (Kalra and Kapoor 2009; Thomas 2010). Based on a refusal to acknowledge that foreign policy, specifically the 2003 invasion of Iraq, may have radicalising effects, early PVE efforts focused on nurturing a British Islam ‘resilient’ to radical influences by elevating the supposedly underrepresented voices of young people and women (Thomas 2017). Several initiatives sought to leverage women in counter-radicalisation work, including the 2008 creation of the National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group (NMWAG), empowerment seminars, and campaigns to improve civic participation and the inclusion of women in mosques (Allen and Guru 2012; Massoumi 2021; Rashid 2016).

Women’s influence over (assumedly radical) Muslim men and boys was explicit within early Prevent policy, which viewed them as useful because of their role in the heart of their communities and families (HM Government 2008, 17) and stressed the need to engage them in counterterrorism work because of their roles in society, as ‘mother, carer, home-keeper, and educator […] Women are often at the hub of family life.’ (Metropolitan Police Authority 2007, 40–41). Amplifying women’s voices and ‘empowering’ them to speak up against radicalising influences was key to Prevent:

By empowering Muslim women in identifying and tackling signs of extremism, the project can support those who are vulnerable and use their knowledge to support other women in their community to do the same. (HM Government 2008, 34)

These gendered counterterrorism approaches have been extensively criticised for the
problematic assumptions on which they are based, including the notion that Muslim women are naturally more ‘moderate’ in their interpretations of scripture and that they desire or require emancipation from patriarchal ethnic/cultural practices believed to hold them back (Rashid 2014; Brown 2020). By encouraging and funding specific Muslim femininities, Prevent assumed that Muslim women, defined by their familial role (as mothers, sisters, wives), were in advantageous positions for recognising signs of radicalisation (in men) and could be co-opted to monitor their homes and communities.

The intersections of race, religion, class, and gender in Prevent are important to draw out here. The idea that extremism can be quelled through empowering Muslim women draws on a long-established Orientalist and imperialist saviour discourse, combined with racialised and classed understandings of who Muslims are in Britain. Since the majority of British Muslims have Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, and are disproportionately located in areas of socio-economic deprivation, assumptions about working class South Asian culture as particularly patriarchal have merged with gendered understandings of Muslim women as in need of rescue. The interplay of these ideas with PVE was articulated in then-Prime Minister David Cameron’s 2016 plan to roll out English language classes for Muslim women as a means to quell radicalisation. Arguing that lack of language skills prevented integration and made women more susceptible to extremist messages, Cameron nevertheless shied from blaming Muslim women themselves, stating: ‘some of these people have come from quite patriarchal societies and perhaps the menfolk haven’t wanted them to speak English’ (Mason and Sherwood 2016). Drawing on the ‘eternal triangle of the imperilled Muslim woman, the dangerous Muslim man and the civilized European’ (Razack 2007, 5), empowerment strategies for Muslim women emerged within PVE as a singular answer to all the social ills believed to make Muslim women ‘vulnerable’ to extremism (Rashid 2014; Brown 2020).
The rise of IS from 2014, and the specific call for women to travel to Syria and Iraq to build the ‘caliphate,’ led to the emergence of the ‘jihadi bride’ as a subject of both fascination and fear (Zarabadi and Ringrose 2018). While around 145 women left the UK for IS territory (Cook and Vale 2018), it was the high profile cases of migrating teenage schoolgirls that constructed the figure of the ‘jihadi bride’ as both at risk and risky: at once both a vulnerable groomed idealist seeking romantic adventure and a security risk whose contacts with IS militants and susceptibility to radical ideology made her dangerous (Martini 2018; Lehane et al. 2018). Despite this recognition that Muslim women could be radicalised subjects, however, the Prevent campaigns aimed at dissuading Muslim girls from IS continued to rely on older gendered counterterrorism narratives that asked Muslim women to engage in counter-terrorism work with their families, including the #MakingAStand campaign, launched in September 2014, which sought to ‘empower’ British Muslim women to stand against IS narratives (Massoumi 2021), and ‘Educate Against Hate’ (2016), which addressed mothers directly as in the best position to notice if their children were acting out of character (Fernandez 2018, 179). The Prevent Tragedies campaign, created by the Metropolitan Police and launched in April 2015, drew upon similar ideas, but specifically engaged with Muslim girls as potentially radicalising subjects.

Prevent Tragedies was targeted to female family members who, it was assumed, would notice and act upon behavioural changes in the young women close to them, and consisted of a website, radio adverts, online videos, and social media pages (Gentry 2020, 146–50), which outlined the signs that might indicate young women were preparing to migrate, from the banal (new clothes and new friends), to the obvious (desire to travel to conflict zones, asking for passports, support for IS). As Andrews
notes, girls’ developing political agency was viewed as a potential indicator of radicalisation, and Prevent Tragedies highlighted the need to look out for girls ‘becoming “interested in politics or foreign policy when she has not shown an interest before”’ (Andrews 2020, 2).

Gender has always been central to British PVE. Initially the gendered logics of Prevent viewed Muslim women through Orientalist lenses as religio-racialised subjects whose social position could be leveraged by co-opting them as allies to dissuade Muslim men from radical activity. Specific femininities were nurtured through PVE, based on the assumption that Muslim women’s innate desire for emancipation from religious and cultural patriarchal oppression aligned them with the state and they could be usefully co-opted. The pivot to Muslim girls within Prevent, following the emergence of the ‘jihadi bride’ as a category of interest, continued to rely on these gendered ideas but created a new subject of interest: the Muslim woman as the ‘vulnerable-fanatic’ (Saeed 2016, 168), viewed as a victim of patriarchal religious and cultural practices, at the same time as being securitised as both an ideological threat to Western values and a potential terrorist (Razack 2022, 86).

I argue that a specific form of Muslim female subjectivity has been nurtured through these discourses, which draws upon hegemonic and pariah femininities to construct the ‘good Muslim girl’. The entangling of counterterrorism projects with the production of hegemonic femininity in Britain means that the disciplining of pariah femininities potentially invites the coercive might of the state: against Muslim girls, but also against their families and communities. To be a ‘bad Muslim girl’ is to tread an extremely dangerous path.
The remainder of this article illustrates how these hegemonic and pariah femininities operate in PVE via the case of the Bethnal Green girls and the discourses that sought to explain them.

Articulating hegemonic and pariah femininities through PVE: The Bethnal Green Girls

The discourses that developed around the Bethnal Green girls allow us to trace the ways the ‘good Muslim girl’ subjectivity is constructed in PVE discourse as a means of identifying radicalising subjects and pacifying problematic subjectivities. I draw attention to three key problems in this articulation of idealised and pariah femininities: it genders the signs of radicalisation based on ideas of how Muslim girls are supposed to behave, it offers unachievable promises of success and advancement that may themselves contribute to radicalisation, and it punishes deviant femininities in violent ways.

Gendering the signs of radicalisation

The production of ‘good Muslim girls’ as an idealised form of Muslim femininity stands as a normative identity, against which potentially radicalising subjects may be judged and discerned. Richard Jackson has argued that the lack of knowledge about future terrorist attacks ‘means that it is reasonable to view every instance of “acting strangely” as a possible indicator of the inevitable coming terror’ (Jackson 2015, 39). PVE operates on similar epistemological ground, where strangeness and normality are viewed through intersectional lenses based on expectations of the ways that religio-racialised and classed gendered subjects are supposed to behave.

When Sultana, Abase, and Begum left the UK in February 2015, media coverage found nothing to indicate they had been radicalised. They were, rather, understood to be
‘good Muslim girls’: ‘academically gifted’ (Halliday, Gani, and Dodd 2015), ‘grade A students’ (Camber and Drury 2015), ‘from moderate, loving homes’ (Sherlock 2015). The girls were described as ‘three bright young people with families and a future’ (Iqbal 2015) and ‘A-students from solid families’ (Freedland 2015). Their pop culture tastes were also emphasised, positioning them as ordinary teenaged girls, well-integrated into mainstream British life.

The girls’ families also claimed that there had been no changes in their behaviour: ‘She [Sultana] was just going to school quite happily, coming home, spending time with her family—just the ordinary things. There was not anything unusual there for the family’ (Home Affairs Committee, 2015, p. 4. Emphasis added). Similarly, Begum was described as “into any normal teenage things. She used to watch ‘Keeping up with the Kardashians’ and stuff like that, so there was nothing that indicated that she was radicalised in any way.’ (Home Affairs Committee, 2015, p. 4. Emphasis added).

The stress on normality and ordinariness demonstrates how indications of radicalisation are measured against the ‘good Muslim girl’ image. Girls who embody this identity, doing well at school and sharing the pop culture tastes of the majority, are not viewed as radicalising because they are viewed as ‘normal’, emulating hegemonic femininity and therefore not of concern.

Critiques of Prevent have noted that a racialised knowledge underpins PVE, which understands potential security threats as distance from an ‘unspoken but normalised white British identity’ (Ali 2020, 587). Those who become radicalised are thus understood to be not acting with agency, but are rather viewed as ‘vulnerable’ to the ‘grooming’ of extremists (Andrews and Skoczylis 2022, 420), however, the vulnerabilities that predispose individuals are believed to be particularly pronounced in
Muslim girls *because of* religio-racialised, classed, and gendered understandings of young Muslim femininities.

As noted by Abbas (2019), Muslim women’s gendered Islamic performances have been (mis)aligned with extremism, leading to interventions from families operating according to state constructions of what to ‘look for’ in radicalising subjects. Muslim girls are understood (through racist and Orientalist stereotypes) to be impeded by their oppressive culture and religion, and this is believed to make them vulnerable to extremist narratives (Saeed 2016). To inoculate them, attempts are made to ‘empower’ them, offering hegemonic forms of neoliberal femininity as a means to overcome these supposed cultural impediments. Prevent’s pivot to Muslim girls constructs valued Muslim femininities that uphold the religio-racialised and classed neoliberal gender order, and pariah femininities that outline the ‘signs’ to look out for in radicalising Muslim girls and attempt to dissuade them from radical activity by assuring them of the opportunities that exist in the UK.

But what of those who do apparently embody these subjectivities? Shortly after the disappearance of the Bethnal Green girls it emerged that a close friend had migrated to Syria a few months earlier, prompting a counterterrorism investigation during which police had spoken to the three, and, concluding that they were not being radicalised, tasked them with delivering letters to their parents requesting permission to take formal statements, later found when the girls’ effects were searched after their departure. This error of judgment indicates that police were working on assumptions about how radicalised Muslim girls behave. Having concluded that the girls were not being groomed, police trusted them to deliver letters to their parents (Home Affairs Committee 2015, 21). Yet, as the discovery of the letters demonstrated, the three had
planned their exit carefully and had hidden their intentions from their closest relatives and trained counterterrorism officers.

Because the girls behaved as good Muslim girls, there had been no reason to regard them as anything else. This is important to note because police were presumably specifically looking for signs of radicalisation. However, since religio-racialised and gendered understandings of radicalisation position Muslim girls as passive victims (an identity inconsistent with the wherewithal required to meticulously plan a secret migration to IS territory), playing the role of ‘good Muslim girls’ meant the three could deflect suspicion, instrumentalising this identity to hide their true intentions. The Bethnal Green girls were able to use their apparent proximity to idealised Muslim femininity to place themselves beyond suspicion, but as their case illustrates, using the good Muslim girl as the standard by which to judge radicalisation is problematic if radicalised/radicalising subjects are shrewd enough to use these expectations to their advantage in evading the attentions of those surveilling them.

**Neoliberal promises and their inability to deliver**

The production of an aspirational neoliberal figure for Muslim girls to emulate as an antidote to radical ideologies also raises serious problems. Neoliberal discourse in Britain focuses on the individual as entirely responsible for her own success or failure. As Rashid (2014, 593) has powerfully argued, the discourse of empowerment that underpins PVE’s pitch to Muslim girls is entirely detached from the structural oppressions that circumscribe the lives of many Muslim women in Britain and is premised on offering a postfeminist route to success predicated on embracing equality, choice, and freedom, and shedding those cultural impediments assumed to hold Muslim women back (Mirza and Meetoo 2018, 228). PVE has increasingly become central to
producing these subjectivities for Muslim women and girls. If idealised femininity is focused on empowerment and individual choice, then any expression of cultural or religious identity becomes automatically suspect. Hence, the signs that we are told to be alert to in Muslim girls are essentially disavowals of post-feminist ideals. Veiling practices, assertion of religious identity as primary (or central), valuing tradition or culture, and an interest in politics are thus read as dangerous signs of potential radicalisation (Kaleem 2022, 282).

Yet, to all appearances, the Bethnal Green girls were good neoliberal subjects:

At school, Amira, a Chelsea football fan, shone in debates, once giving a speech on why Muslim women wear the veil. She passed three GCSEs in maths and science early, at age 14. […] she was a star of the school athletics squad, competing across Southern England in the 800 and 1,200 metres. Although she wore the hijab to class, covering her hair in line with Islamic teachings, she abandoned the headgear when she played sport or was with her girlfriends. […] A member of the athletics squad explained: ‘Amira didn't make a big thing about her Muslim faith. She came to parties if there was no alcohol, and we'd go shopping for clothes. She was one of us.’ (Reid 2015)

Here the attributes of the ‘good Muslim girl’ are laid out starkly in neoliberal terms. Described as studious, intelligent, and hard-working, Abase’s talents had clearly been funnelled towards academic excellence and athletic performance. She was presented as integrated, supporting the local football team, and going to parties. Her Muslimness, consistent with the attributes of good Muslim girls, was downplayed: ‘although’ she wore the hijab (a potential sign of dangerous difference), she would ‘abandon’ it and blend in as ‘one of us’.

Focusing on the intersectional dimensions of these discourses draws attention to the ways vulnerability to radicalisation is read via the matrices of social power, imbued with religio-racialised and classed understandings, through which Muslim girls are scrutinised and regulated. An idealised femininity is thus constructed, offering a subjectivity to which Muslim girls can consent, which promises success through
neoliberal empowerment as well as an antidote to radicalisation. These ideas were articulated in Senior National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism Policing, Helen Ball’s appeal to girls considering migration to consider the *opportunities* open in Syria:

> Who are you going to be in life? […] These opportunities are so much small and circumscribed in Syria than if you remained here in the UK. (Quoted in Andrews 2020, 18)

But that these empty neoliberal promises may themselves contribute to radicalisation is considered outside the realms of acceptable discourse and the focus in PVE on individualistic neoliberal subjectivities as an antidote to extremism routinely ignores or silences the possibility that these could in fact act as ‘push’ factors in radicalisation. This is curious, because female migrants to IS consistently spoke of the alienation they experienced as they attempted to conform in Western societies (Patel and Westermann 2018, 75). Aqsa Mahmood, a Scottish student who became a key propagandist from IS territory, wrote in her Tumblr blog about the emptiness of discourses of success and the pull of a more meaningful life in Syria:

> Most sisters I have come across have been in university studying courses with many promising paths, with big, happy families and friends, and everything in the Dunyah [material world] to persuade one to stay behind and enjoy the luxury. If we had stayed behind, we could have been blessed with it all from a relaxing and comfortable life and lots of money. Wallahi [I swear] that’s not what we want. (Sherwood et al. 2014)

Shamima Begum herself stated that Islamophobia and racism in Britain had motivated her journey to IS in search of a ‘pure Islamic life’ (Vale 2021).

> These narratives indicate that neoliberal societal expectations to some extent functioned as push factors, with the promise of a less material, more spiritually rewarding life acting as a pull factor to IS territory. PVE reached out to Muslim girls chiefly by focusing on the misinformation of IS propaganda and the reality of life in
Syria, but the subjectivities offered to Muslim girls as an antidote to extremism fail to take seriously the utopic possibilities for a meaningful life that radical ideologies offer.

**Disciplining pariah Muslim women**

If the signs of radicalisation are gendered and we are encouraged to discern potential female radicals by their failure to conform to idealised femininities, then this places those who do enact pariah femininities in great danger from violent state counterterrorism practices.

Several scholars have noted that the dynamics of Prevent construct a ‘Muslim community’ that is collectively suspect, but in which ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims are differentiated (Mamdani 2004). Ragazzi has argued that within the category of the suspect, the ‘at risk’ and the ‘risky’ are formed as two distinct categories. While the ‘at risk’ are potentially rescuable from radical influences, for the ‘risky’ it is too late, ‘they represent a threat of contagion which must be stopped in order to avoid the spread of the ‘disease’. (Ragazzi 2017, 733; Heath-Kelly 2017). We need, therefore, to pay attention not just to the ways idealised Muslim femininity is constructed, but also the ways pariah femininities are disciplined and controlled. PVE discourse draws on acceptable forms of Muslim femininity in its construction of both the ‘at risk’ as a vulnerable, groomed subject and the ‘risky’ as those women who prioritise their Islamic identities (Shain 2021). The opaque line between extremism and moderation means that the threat of being viewed as deviant remains constant, but pariah performances of Muslim femininity are not just deviant indicators of radicalisation. They are understood to be profoundly threatening to the social order that demand action to prevent contamination. This is illustrated by the treatment of Shamima Begum after the defeat of IS.
When discovered in al-Hol refugee camp, Begum gave a frank interview stating that she did not regret going to IS territory, that she had had a ‘good time in Syria’ and that the 2017 Manchester Arena terrorist attack was comparable to coalition airstrikes on women and children in IS territory (Loyd 2019). Despite saying exactly what we would expect a groomed victim to say, in a camp surrounded by violent women still loyal to IS (Vale 2019), she was reviled because she was not repentant or forlorn enough to be a sympathetic character. Begum had been accused of no crime and she had, according to legal definitions, been a victim of child trafficking (Reprieve 2021), yet within two weeks of her discovery, her citizenship was revoked, effectively rendering her stateless.

Responding to questions in Parliament the day before her citizenship was removed, Home Secretary Sajid Javid, stated:

Members will have seen the comments that Shamima Begum has made in the media, and they will have to draw their own conclusions. Quite simply, if someone backs terror, there must be consequences [...] if individuals have left Britain to join Daesh [...] [t]hose individuals have made that decision, and the Government’s first priority is to protect this country and do whatever is necessary. (HC Deb 18 February 2019, col. 1193, 1197, emphasis added)

This statement is notable for its nods towards the idealised Muslim female subjectivities discussed in this article. Begum’s failure to make good decisions was laid entirely at her own feet through a neoliberal discourse of responsibility where all other aspects of the case (her age, police failures, the possibility of online ‘grooming’) were discarded and her own culpability was isolated in the single ‘decision’ that she took to go to Syria. In stating that actions have consequences, all the steps that led to that decision were obscured and Begum became fully responsible for her own plight. This discursive shift, from vulnerable groomed subject to pariah, whose potential return to the country was deemed so unpalatable that her citizenship was removed, is particularly important to note given the conclusions of the APPG on Trafficked Britons to Syria that:
UK public bodies failed to identify at-risk individuals who were particularly vulnerable to trafficking […] These were not isolated incidents; rather this was a systemic failure to combat ISIS trafficking operations (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Trafficked Britons in Syria 2021, 5)

It is hard to imagine a harsher form of disciplinary state action than the removal of citizenship. The treatment of Begum illustrates the dangers of pariah Muslim femininity and the ways that idealised subjectivities can be wielded against those who fail to conform. The discourse of neoliberal responsibility was wielded against Begum in ways that discounted the complexities of the case and even the government’s own understanding of radicalisation as a process by which vulnerable individuals are groomed. The threat she represented was understood to be so great that the coercive power of the counterterrorism state was required to protect the social order and crush her pariah femininity. While the figure of the good Muslim girl acts as an idealised figure against which radicalisation can be measured, any deviation from the contours of this identity is potentially extremely dangerous.

**Conclusion**

Ideas about Muslim femininity have created troubling subjectivities for Muslim women and girls in the UK, approaching them as potential informants, creating mistrust and suspicion within communities, securitising the relationships between mothers and daughters and placing those who enact pariah femininities in great danger from the state. As the example of the Bethnal Green girls illustrates, PVE discourse in Britain relies on the construction of the ‘good Muslim girl’ subjectivity, against which pariah femininities exist as a ‘checklist’ for radicalisation. Assuming that radicalised young women are ‘groomed,’ and that the ‘groomed’ will behave in certain ways, creates an inventory of signs to be spotted. Yet the Bethnal Green girls swerved these assumptions by enacting the neoliberal ‘good Muslim girl’ subjectivity, appearing helpful and
willing to police officers and providing the confirmation bias that these officers sought. If radicalised girls can so easily deceive trained counterterrorism officers by repressing any signs of pariah femininity, then the usefulness of the gendered assumptions upon which PVE policy and practice rests must be questioned.

Understanding the ways that the British PVE agenda articulates gender and endorses particular gendered ways of being is impossible without considering the intersections of religion, race, and class within these acceptable ways of being a ‘good British citizen.’ As Rashid has noted, policy in the UK has engaged Muslim women chiefly as victims ‘of “pathological Muslim patriarchy” rather than as victims of deprived socio-economic conditions, citizenship uncertainties, or patriarchy and racism in wider society.’ (Rashid 2014, 601). Prevent has drawn on this theoretical landscape, and attempted to nurture ‘good’ ways of enacting Muslim femininity as a means of upholding the neoliberal gendered and racialised order, however, the emphasising of this, in policy and practice, has quashed other narratives, particularly those that stress structural oppressions in the UK (racism, Islamophobia, class and geographical barriers), pointing to the possibility that these might in fact diminish women’s empowerment and themselves contribute to radicalisation. Such attempts to centre the importance of the intersectional oppressions faced by differently situated Muslim women in the UK have been resisted by successive governments and are viewed as contributing minimally (if at all) to radicalisation, precisely because radicalisation is viewed through neoliberal lenses as resulting from individual psychological vulnerability rather than the rational choice of an agential subject.

Hegemony operates most successfully as power by consent, and hegemonic femininity is no different. In constructing ‘good Muslim girls’, a specific subjectivity is offered to Muslim women that encourages ‘moderate’ Islamic articulations grounded on
neoliberal white femininities that emphasise achievement, empowerment, and choice. But coercion always waits in the wings, and state violence can always be unleashed on those whose performances of pariah femininities are deemed dangerous to the social order. Begum’s case illustrates this well, but it can only be understood through an intersectional lens. The extent of state violence against her would be unthinkable if her pariah femininity were not inflected with other oppressions that made her vulnerable to state violence. It was only possible to revoke her citizenship because of she was the child of migrant parents: if she had not had the possibility of gaining Bangladeshi citizenship, she could not legally have been denied her British (by birth) citizenship (Begum v Home Secretary [2021] UKSC 7 2021).

The femininities constructed through British PVE serve and support state counterterrorism projects that disregard the intersectional structural oppressions that impact the lives of Muslim women and girls in the UK. Without attention to these the problematic gendered picture of radicalisation will remain, where Muslim women are instrumentalised in state projects to monitor and deradicalise the private sphere and where Muslim girls are approached as groomed, passive victims who can be dissuaded from radical ideologies via a neoliberal package of promises that are unlikely to ever be fulfilled. Ultimately, the wielding of femininities in PVE discourse fails to take seriously the lives and experiences of women and girls in the UK and the possibility that radical ideologies might offer something more. Ignoring these realities will continue to produce outcomes that are counterproductive at best.

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