

**Review of Naaz Rashid, *Veiled Threats. Representing the Muslim Woman in Public Policy Discourses*, Bristol: Policy Press 2016, pp. 224, ISBN: 9781447325178**

BY MARGARETHA A. VAN ES, DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES, UTRECHT UNIVERSITY, THE NETHERLANDS

What does women's emancipation have to do with counter-terrorism? Apparently a lot – at least, if you ask the UK Home Office. After the 2005 London bombings, the Labour government developed a number of policy responses; one of them being the 'Preventing Violent Extremism' agenda (or simply 'Prevent'). Its goal was to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism. In 2008, the government decided to allocate part of the Prevent budget to the empowerment of Muslim women. Muslim women were seen as part of a 'silent majority' that should be given a stronger voice in their communities in order to build resilience against extremism. In addition to a variety of initiatives at the local level, a National Muslim Women's Advisory Group (NMWAG) was established to advise central government. In a new book, the sociologist Naaz Rashid critically examines this conflation of policies for Muslim women's empowerment with policies against violent extremism. Rashid currently works as a teaching fellow at the University of Sussex. In her book, she not only deconstructs the image of the 'Muslim woman' as it emerges in policy discourse, but also explores how different Muslim women, who were directly involved or affected by these initiatives, engaged with these top-down policy narratives. The research material consists of parliamentary debates and political speeches, as well as interviews with policy actors (predominantly Muslim women) who were involved at different levels of the policy chain.

The Prevent agenda has often been criticised for demonizing the Muslim population as a whole. What makes Rashid's work interesting is its focus on the gendered dimensions of Prevent. In Chapter 1, the author scrutinises policy narratives about the empowerment of Muslim women within the broader Prevent agenda. In Chapter 2, she contextualises Prevent within the rhetoric of Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis. Chapter 3 stresses the importance of studying the effects of policy measures within different local contexts. In Chapter 4, Rashid evaluates the government's attempt to give the 'silent majority' of Muslim women a stronger voice, questioning whether Muslim women's voices

were really that 'silent' and whether this particular form of state intervention actually helped them to become heard. In Chapters 5 and 6, she discusses the problematic ways in which Muslim women's empowerment is being conceptualised within the Prevent agenda, with Islam being construed as a source of disadvantage and simultaneously as a potential source of emancipation. Chapter 7 provides a summary of the research findings.

In a compelling account, Rashid reveals how the Prevent agenda securitises everything that is related to Muslims, which means that it construes all Muslims as potential terrorists. The empowerment of Muslim women is no longer addressed as a legitimate goal in itself, but has come to serve a different purpose, namely that of counter-terrorism. Within Prevent, Muslim women are presented as in need for empowerment. Paradoxically, the state addresses them first and foremost as wives and mothers of potentially radicalizing men and not as potentially radicalizing women, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles. Rashid also shows how state interventions seem to be crowding out activities that had previously been initiated by Muslim women themselves. Moreover, religion is increasingly emphasised as the difference that matters, which makes it difficult to create or maintain feminist solidarity and cooperation between ethnic minority women across different religions. Last but not least, the women in the NMWAG often reported being disappointed about their role. They saw the NMWAG as an institution that could influence government policy, but they were merely expected to carry out tasks for the government. The women felt discouraged from instigating 'difficult' conversations (for example about everyday racism or about discrimination in the labour market), which makes the government's claim of 'giving voice to the silent majority' highly questionable. Rashid concludes that the Prevent agenda reinforces a stereotypical notion of 'the' Muslim woman as oppressed, and that it fails to take into account the diversity among Muslim women in the UK in terms of their geographical locations, socio-economic backgrounds and citizenship statuses.

The book has a few minor shortcomings. First, it is strongly focused on the UK – not only as an object of study, but also in terms of the scholarly literature that the author engages with. The author does not make any comparisons with other Western European countries, where policies for Muslim women's empowerment are conflated with those for immigrant integration but not directly with those for counter-terrorism. Hence, it remains unclear to what extent all the problematic aspects of the UK initiatives for women's empowerment directly result from their being embedded within Prevent. Second, the author provides little information about her research material, while it seems that the interview respondents have not been anonymized. The book does not include a clear overview of the policy texts that were studied, nor does it become clear who have precisely been interviewed and why. Although different scholarly disciplines have different conventions regarding such matters, a greater transparency about the research material may have helped the reader to follow her argument better. Third, the author could have engaged more elaborately with the arguments given by some of her respondents, who seem supportive of the Prevent agenda and its initiatives for women's empowerment (see for example p. 83 and p. 91). It would have been interesting to read more about why some Muslim women support a controversial and problematic policy agenda such as Prevent. Instead of immediately problematizing such supportive statements, as

Rashid does, it would have strengthened her argument if she had given more space to such voices and explicitly countered their arguments.

However, all in all, Rashid's new book *Veiled Threats* is a valuable contribution that provides new scholarly insights into how policy contributes to the social construction of its target group – in this case the 'Muslim woman'. It is therefore also an important warning to policy makers regarding the unintended consequences of their work.