

Keynote Speech by Detective Inspector Khizra Dhindsa¹

Joint OSCE Secretariat – OSCE ODIHR Expert Roundtable
on the Role and Empowerment of Women in Countering Violent Extremism and
Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism

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Flying on One Wing

My thanks to Maj-Britt for the introduction, and to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, for hosting this very important event. Ladies and gentlemen good morning to you.

I am the lead police officer for England and Wales in the area of Women's engagement against Violent Extremism and Radicalisation that Leads to Terrorism. In my country, this area of work is known simply as "*Prevent*." The aims of *Prevent* are to stop people from becoming or supporting terrorists.

I report to you today having spent the last 12 months visiting each of the 43 Police Force areas of England and Wales as part of Project Shanaz, which is our national effort to maximise the engagement, consultation, partnership working, contribution and deployment of women in preventing terrorism.

This exercise has involved interviewing thousands of women within many diverse communities about how they felt they could be involved with *Prevent*, and investigating why it was that they currently were -or were not -engaged in this effort. I also spoke to many police and partnership *Prevent* practitioners, to examine their views on what constituted effective *Prevent* engagement with women, and what barriers they have faced in attaining this.

One outcome of this is The Shanaz Network of 50 female community leaders from each of the 43 police force areas across England and Wales, which is supported by numerous women's groups, professional women and institutions nationally and locally, and has a tremendous reach into our communities. The Network has come together specifically to address violent extremism from a female perspective.

These Muslim and Non-Muslim female role models are socially involved, civically engaged, powerful agents of change, who working together *become* a living, breathing counter-narrative to both far-right and Al Qaida style ideology.

¹ Note from the OSCE Secretariat on the author: With ten years of service as a police officer, Detective Inspector Dhindsa's background is in community policing within the West Midlands Police Force in the United Kingdom. She is currently seconded to the Association of Chief Police Officers until February 2013 as part of the National *Prevent* Delivery Unit, Community Engagement Team, with the national lead for women's engagement against violent extremism and terrorism. Ms. Dhindsa is responsible for promoting the proper inclusion of women from diverse communities across the country in shaping the delivery of *Prevent* engagement activity. She has created a supportive national network of women community leaders to this end. Drawing on data collected from visits to all 43 Police Forces of England and Wales, she is currently preparing guidance for police forces with a toolkit of best practices on the subject of engaging Women in *Prevent*. In 2011, Ms. Dhindsa received the Asian Women of Achievement Award and was nominated British Policewoman of the year.



The ongoing Project Shanaz journey can be followed at www.facebook.com/Project.Shanaz, where practitioners can also interact with many of the Project participants.

The Project Shanaz findings have fed into a national police guidance policy for engaging women in *Prevent*, which I have brought along with me. It is currently in its final draft version but is still subject to ratification so please do look at it if you wish, but the document cannot leave this room.

However, I will present some of the most relevant key findings of that document to you here today.

To begin with, the overwhelming consensus is that we made the unfortunate mistake of viewing terrorism from the outset as an exclusively male issue. Most of our structures, advisory bodies and methods were created around this flawed understanding, and have been thus perpetuated for years. These processes were never built to cater for women's inclusion. But however entrenched, they need to be dismantled now and re-built in a gender-sensitive way.

To determine how to do this, I consulted with numerous Muslim women during this data collection phase, but equally with many women from other faiths and none, and women representing other protected characteristics such as disability, sexuality, pregnancy and race.

Because, of course, Muslim women matter- and counter-terrorism efforts impact heavily on their communities, so they should be able to help shape those efforts- but they are not the only ones who matter in this respect. Our communities belong to other women too, and every kind of terrorism is a whole-community problem requiring the combined efforts of all participants. This is why the net was cast wider.

A key question was, of course, that having spent years engaging with Muslim women in order, we said, to build resilience to Al-Qaida style terrorism, who do we target now to build resilience to far-right extremism? Do we now start approaching white, working class women and saying we need to build their resilience (and their family's) to becoming racists?

Clearly not, because *this* would be as insulting as *that* was. And while we may have previously been accused of breaching the human rights of UK Muslim communities in our discrimination of them on the grounds of religion, a protected characteristic, I do not suggest perpetuating this mistake with other groups in the interests of consistency. I suggest instead a general philosophy of the "whole-community" approach to all forms of extremism.

But what of the times when a Muslim opinion is specifically needed? There has always been a trend of over-reliance on self-proclaimed community leaders in the world of *Prevent* engagement. This has tended to result in fairly homogenous consultation groups of agreeable Muslim men of a certain age and usually affiliated with a Mosque. Their value as advisory bodies is often limited due to their propensity to agree with each other and the police, and this is consolidated by the long periods for which many of them have served on such a group. Whether consciously or through careless omission, female voices have largely been absent to date, in community engagement activity supporting *Prevent*.

There are approximately 1 million Muslim women living in the UK, and according to recent research by Cardiff University they have “little contact or interaction with the police,” and disproportionately low confidence in them- which in itself is a barrier to *Prevent* engagement.

It is worth noting that the presence of women within UK mosques is also strikingly limited, and female leadership in Mosques is practically non-existent. Therefore if we rely exclusively on mosque engagement when we wish to access Muslim communities, our engagement policy is fundamentally gender-discriminatory and its outcomes are likely to be gender-biased. In relation to engaging with women, this attitude is virtually guaranteed to fail. It is also illegal, of course, because equal access to public service is a fundamental human right which is being denied to women in this context.

Police forces reported greater success where male support from within diverse communities was present for women who wished to be civically engaged. However, this is not frequently the case. Many ethnic minority cultures are patriarchal in nature and men who are accustomed to having the public role in their community are often reluctant to relinquish it, and least of all to a woman. Women from South Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds in particular reported that they were actively discouraged from engaging with the police or other service providers by male gatekeepers who voiced concerns around them becoming, ‘rebellious’, ‘tainted’ or ‘out of control.’

Also- numerous women said how unhelpful it was when misogynistic elements of their own subculture found tacit support from service providers- including senior police officers. Instead of using their power to effect change and to support those women who are desperately trying to emerge and have their voices heard, a frequent complaint is that those influential officers instead often tiptoe around ‘cultural sensitivities’ while either assuming that women from within those minority communities do wish to be civically engaged, or else being too afraid to offend by meddling with what they do not understand. Frightened of damaging relationships with male community members, they stop short of their duty. In this way, the police and partners are creating further barriers themselves by acquiescing with and reinforcing the patriarchal attitudes of the sub-culture in question- rather than challenging its norms in favour of our shared British values- which would insist on the inclusion of those women who wish to be involved.

Yes, we would probably then be accused (by some men) of attempting to undermine the traditional gender balance of a minority group. But in this context, is that such a terrible thing?

Too many people from within and outside their cultures have always told women what their *role* is or is not. I shall not be joining them today.

In times of national need such as during war, traditionally male roles have frequently been very well discharged by women. Such a need exists today, and we should be open to possibilities.

In any case, we have never had to define a man's *role* in the same way. We have never had to carve him out a niche. And yet on those rare occasions where women are discussed in the context of counter terrorism, it has been as a bit of an after-thought, a side-attraction. Never as core business.

Counter-terrorist narratives tend to have this much similarity with terrorist narratives: They both mobilize and reinforce stereotypes about men and women. If you add religious stereotypes to this mix, you end up working from an assumption that Muslim women are passive, subordinate, moderate and maternal.

But in the world of counter-terrorism, assumptions are a dangerous thing. For example, the notions policy-makers hold about Muslim women can lead them to underestimate the capability of these women, and to aim low- assigning them roles to execute as mothers, nurturers, and soft influencing forces within the home.

By approaching Muslim women in this blinkered way, we have ostracized some and achieved the inclusion of others only in ways which are either a watered-down version of what they might have delivered, or with which they are not intrinsically comfortable.

Certainly women are often best placed in the home and the community to notice the "absence of the normal or the presence of the abnormal" before anyone else, because they have an intimate working knowledge of what "normal" looks and feels like.

Certainly they should be equipped with the knowledge to address these concerns so that they are not rendered silent witnesses to the descent into extremism. So that they can calm confused young minds and safeguard those vulnerable to recruitment by terrorists.

But women have utility far beyond the role of mother. Extremists recognise that.

The far-right English Defence League or EDL for example, have an active female branch they call the "EDL Angels" who are planning a demonstration next month in the North of England. THEY know better than to fly on one wing, when they were given two.

Last year Al-Qaida launched 'Shamika', a magazine for women- the stated purpose of which is to inspire more female terrorists. And in other ways the Al Qaida narrative is subtly changing to include women more directly in the collective effort.

With no place to safely discuss religion in the way than men can 5 times a day at mosque, and little provision for female converts to Islam, many women are in any case themselves vulnerable to warped interpretations of the faith.

Terrorists have previously used women in suicide attacks and this has invoked greater than usual sympathy and drawn attention to their cause, because it is shocking to see a Muslim woman whom you have only known through the stereotype of a veiled, oppressed and mute creature, take such drastic action. It flies in the face of what people thought they knew. They wake up. They take notice.

For similar reasons, everyone sits up and listens when a counter-narrative is delivered by a Muslim woman- such as a female scholar- rather than the usual male Imam seen in the media. Because it is a new voice and a fresh perspective. Because it is, frankly, a surprise.

Of course it would be careless to guess at women having less radical views on the whole, but are they less supportive of violence in order to further an agenda? Are there hormonal or psychological reasons why women are less disposed to violence? And if we are amplifying their voices in the media, in local politics and in religious establishments, can we hope to be automatically giving a platform to mainstream voices, and drowning out extremist narrative?

Empowerment of women in *Prevent* can mean simply evening up the playing field and opening the door for those who wish to come through. Where we have failed in the UK, this has frequently been because we have bundled women through that door- and they, for financial or political gain, have acquiesced for a period of time. We have also frequently failed when we have insisted on thrusting women who are often naturally modest into centre stage, in an uncomfortable cross-examination of their faith or identity, which frankly was no business of ours. People have a right to a private and family life and that is beyond question and beyond debate.

Where we have succeeded, this has usually been because key *Prevent* concepts have been explained, and then local women have then stepped up and led the response. Counter-terrorism engagement and education activity tends to become more credible and palatable in communities as it becomes further removed from delivery by police and partners- both of whom should support this delivery *by community members* remotely, if they are asked to.

The most commonly given reasons for women leading *Prevent* like this were that they wished to safeguard the next generation and protect their community; that they wanted gender equality; that in the case of Muslim women they wanted to serve their faith by defending the reputation of Islam. Some women even described it as their Islamic duty to engage with *Prevent*- One Qur'anic phrase that was often quoted was that, "*If you save one innocent life, you save all of humanity*".

Particularly in relation to religious counter-narratives, these must absolutely come from community sources as it was viewed as wholly inappropriate and distasteful for government to be perceived to be interfering with anybody's fundamental human right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

It also became apparent early on that reported and unreported cases of hate crime rose against Muslim women more than any other group, in the aftermath of a terrorist incident at home or abroad. Whether this was because Muslim women in hijab are more readily identifiable than Muslim men, or whether they are considered an easier target by virtue of their gender, many women said they had a vested interest in the success of *Prevent* work, because they did not wish to see such attacks in their city. This included countless non-Muslim women who explained that it was their civic responsibility to stand united with their Muslim sisters and against extremism in all its forms.

Compared with traditional engagement with men, it was noticeable that engagement with women penetrated communities more deeply. Women's groups have significant reach, and women's informal networks are also very effective at disseminating messages. We also noted that many male audiences had already been saturated but significant scope remained with female audiences, sometimes in places like home study circles with women whom only other women

could access. Added to the fact that many community-derived *Prevent* efforts created by women were educative in nature, we saw a domino effect where for very little outlay, *Prevent* teams were seeing significant improvements through women in terms of community understanding of the issues and contributions towards developing solutions.

Of course there were also numerous barriers uncovered. Provisions must often be considered in relation to childcare, interpreters, transport, prayer and nursing facilities- and these provisions cost money. In times of austerity, we need to consider how much we value the input of women on this agenda, and if it is important, then it requires consistent cross-government support and funding, not occasional lip service.

And if women cannot be recruited onto advisory bodies which represent them at every level of decision-making from national strategy to grassroots delivery (which should be the aim) then we need to consider how else and where else we can access their views. Would it be less onerous for them to contribute via a local ambassador or champion, through a radio phone-in, an online surgery, or via email, Facebook or Twitter?

Also, overwhelming consensus was that single-issue engagement on *Prevent* is unlikely to succeed, as is transactional contact only at times when there is an intelligence requirement to fulfil.

Women may not at the outset understand the relevance of *Prevent* in their lives, but they will usually want to know what we have done about drug-dealing in their neighbourhood or anti-social behaviour issues. Consistent engagement on issues which matter to women is the only proper foundation on which to build *Prevent* engagement. In Thames Valley, a practitioner called Naheem Bashir summarised this by telling me, *"Intelligence should be a by-product of effective engagement, not the sole motivation behind it. If you just go out looking for intelligence, you won't find it."*

Britain has a strong and proud history of neighbourhood policing, where priorities are taken from communities and locally based officers work in partnership with other service providers to deliver on long-term issues. Initial *Prevent* engagement often works better coming from these 'Safer Neighbourhood Teams' (or SNTs) as there tends to be a pre-existing relationship of trust between them and the communities they have been part of for years. SNTs can also answer questions relating to other issues such as hate crime which women may raise concerns over- so that the engagement is holistic and meaningful. They often also play a valuable role as the link between *Prevent* teams and the whole community.

The 2010 to 2011 UK citizenship survey shows that support for extremism is linked to a perception of discrimination, experience of racial/religious hatred and a negative view of policing, so it is relevant to address women on these other issues in order to reduce the likelihood of support for extremism and increase the likelihood of effective *Prevent* engagement.

However, we found on several occasions that such broader engagement had taken place to the exclusion of *Prevent* messaging. The data-collection phase uncovered a large number of *Prevent*-funded initiatives for Muslim women which involved such activities as horse-riding, swimming, flower-arranging and embroidery, and were allowed to continue as such sometimes for years without any *Prevent*-associated conversations actually taking place.

While practitioners explained their nervousness about damaging the relationships they had painstakingly built by discussing what they believed to be a contentious subject, we cannot expect

communities to have confidence in *Prevent* if the staff delivering it are not confident in discussing it, and are apologising their way through such discussions. Often a high staff turnover in *Prevent* also meant compromise in the quality of relationships with local women, as did the fact that the UK police service is inadequately representative of women in any case, with only 26% of staff being female, and fewer still being in top management and decision-making positions.

The terminology in the UK strategy was also generally stated to create a barrier, with the term "*Prevent*" coupled with the early near-exclusive engagement with the Muslim community, leading to claims that all Muslims were being viewed as potential "terrorists in our midst" whom government felt needed to be "prevented" from acting upon their tendencies. The term "*Safeguard*" was proposed by many communities as a fit and proper alternative, and something they would be more disposed to be involved with.

There was transferable learning which police forces had gleaned in relation to women's empowerment to address domestic violence and honour-based violence, which was deemed relevant to *Prevent* empowerment. In essence, the need was identified to create a disconnect between faith, race and terrorism. In the way that DV and HBV have historically been viewed as difficult to report due to the religious and cultural contexts they have been viewed in, terrorist activity needs removing from such contexts as far as possible to prevent stigma, feelings of disloyalty and "selling out" if you stand against it.

The comparison goes further, as women engaging with *Prevent* receive threats from men within and outside their communities in the same way that female activists against violence towards women have suffered the same for years. Not all women will speak up in these circumstances. They do not know what those who threaten them may be capable of. Some women will shout louder – but inevitably others will be silenced. This is blatant interference with their freedom of expression, and authorities ignore it at their peril. Such women should be given every support and protection if they choose to speak out against violent extremism.

Of course the concept of universal human rights has been subject to criticism over the years by Islamic institutions arguing that it is based on Judeo-Christian tradition and therefore incompatible with the observance of Islam. This is certainly an argument espoused by extremists. And western states have time and again leapt to the defence of the concept of universal human rights whenever this has happened. But we need to first ensure that our house is in order. In this speech I have highlighted several gender-based human rights violations which are arguably being caused or permitted by counter-terrorism measures. National security is of paramount importance, but those two words cannot be used to justify such ongoing violations.

It is not until women from our diverse communities have an effective voice at every level of decision making, and governments and international actors consistently acknowledge and respond to that voice, that those decisions will have gender-sensitive, human rights compliant and EFFECTIVE results.

We need to consider what success will look like, and who we will consult with to ensure these performance criteria are appropriate. We need to involve women in the assessment process for this, or even allow them to own it outright and hold us accountable for it.

We are fortunate to be in a position today to be of service to the women of our countries and to make Europe safer. Thank you to the OSCE for that opportunity, and thank you ladies and gentlemen, for listening.