



Targeting Muslim women must stop

□ **By: Shelina Zahra Janmohamed** □

When Muslim women raise their voices for access to education and employment, or autonomy or rights, we are rarely listened to. But as weapons against the other, suddenly we become significant. I've had enough. The war over Muslim women must stop.

The war over Muslim women continues to rage, as though we are a territory to be owned, a missile to be deployed in the vested interests of others, and as collateral damage in a cosmic conflict.

If you open Western newspapers and there is a story about terrorism, you will find our picture next to it. If you read justifications of military action in Afghanistan, it is our "liberation" that is cited.

If societies where Muslims live as minorities are failing, our niqabs, our economic inactivity, our supposed segregation is to blame. But also, if you listen to Muslim religious leaders we are responsible for being the buffer before a wave of catastrophic western evil.

Our headscarves are the sandbags holding back the fire of western feminism. We are told that our fight for rights is a bid to destroy family and society.

This war is constant with no benefit to us as Muslim women. We are dispensable in the war effort but also required to be first in the line of fire.

In the UK this week, a police campaign was launched encouraging Muslim women to inform on any menfolk they suspect of joining the war effort in Syria. The British government is concerned about Muslim men who will become radicalized in Syria and then return to the UK. No mention of those who go abroad to join other armies.

The campaign is part of the UK government's wider Prevent strategy that has been running for the last several years, targeting Muslim communities in the bid to fight terrorism. It is a widely discredited programme that invested money in deprived Muslim communities with the goal of averting them from terrorism.

The flaw in the logic of course was that, as in all communities, just a handful inhabit a criminal fringe. And like all communities, if the authorities start to view an entire community as one collective homogeneous mass with only one defining factor – being a potential terrorist – then there can never be a relationship of trust with authorities.

Muslim women find ourselves on the sharp end of this demonisation. On the one hand we are nothing but meek, oppressed, submissive. The subject of veiling – whether it is niqab or hijab – is constantly on the radar. Political leaders and influencers talk about women “forced” to cover, needing “help”, and being “liberated” by embracing “secular” values.

Suddenly we Muslim women have the burden of responsibility to “save” everyone. Suddenly, we have been co-opted into spying on husbands and sons. Before the accusation is levelled at Muslim women that we share responsibility for society's safety like anyone else, I want to be quite clear: we are not so stupid that we can't work out right from wrong. We already work to safeguard our own families from any misguided sense of violent heroics. Already, we are under scrutiny as potential terrorists, presumed guilty. And now, if Muslim men do take part, then we Muslim women will be held accountable. We are both victim and criminal.

In this campaign, we don't hear about Abbas Khan, who went to Syria to help as a doctor in the humanitarian cause. He was kidnapped and killed. It is his mother spearheading the campaign to find out what happened to him.

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