

MEDIA STATEMENT

30 January 2019

MWNUK welcomes Independent Review of Prevent Strategy and urges that the panel is truly independent, transparent and credible.

MWNUK are pleased to hear that an independent review will be carried out of the Prevent Strategy, which we believe is very much needed at this stage. Counter-extremism work is vital to challenge and tackle all forms of extremism and hate which place us all in danger. However, such work must be effective and also promote peace and harmony instead of fear, distrust and isolation. It should also uphold rather than undermine human rights and the rule of law. We hope the review will ensure that all these aims will be achieved going forwards.

Chair Nazmin Akthar commented:

"We have been long concerned about the language and approach used in counter-extremism work which in our opinion stigmatises Muslims, encroaches upon their rights and places them at increased risk of discrimination and anti-Muslim hate crimes. Many feel that the Prevent Strategy has led to the development of an Anti-Muslim narrative where all Muslims are seen as potential terrorists. Such stereotyping has real impacts on lives including hindering chances of obtaining employment. This only goes towards creating discord and isolation between communities, when in fact Prevent should be enabling cohesion. We have been especially concerned by what we feel has been a blurring of lines between law and rhetoric, so that what would otherwise be unlawful becomes lawful and that which is lawful becomes unlawful. Thus we see surveillance strategies being implemented that would in any other circumstance be seen as unacceptable, and at the same time lawful expressions of views and opinions are being inhibited due to a fear of being regarded as an extremist. It can almost seem as if British Muslims are being pushed into the modern Panopticon".

Our concerns were exacerbated by the appointment of Sara Khan as Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism. We had hoped that the creation of a Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) would assist in ending anti-Muslim narratives and bring communities together to tackle all forms of extremism, including far-right extremism which continues to be on the rise and particularly affects visibly Muslim women. However, the appointment of a Lead Commissioner who is considered by many to lack independence from the government and lack credibility to work on the issues affecting a broad range of communities has been a lost opportunity. Our fears have been cemented further by the recent consultation launched by the CCE in which we feel conclusions have already been drawn based upon a presupposed framework of assumptions regarding extremism. The results of the consultation are therefore, in our opinion, likely to be skewed and collect only those views which support the existing preconceptions.

Executive Director Shaista Gohir added:

"There are some on the fringe who have turned 'Prevent' into a slur word that they throw at any individual or organisation that sees the importance of supporting the

government to tackle all forms of extremism. MWNUK has also been subjected to such negativity, in a bid to stop our engagement with the government. Such individuals will criticise but will not offer solutions; this review is an opportunity to address the genuine concerns about the strategy and in turn, quell those intent on being disruptive and demonising others working hard to defeat extremists. To do so, it is essential that those tasked with reviewing the Prevent strategy are truly independent and hold the necessary knowledge, expertise and credibility to conduct a review in a transparent and impartial manner. Otherwise, those who truly should be engaging with the review will be deterred and this will adversely affect the validity of both the review and its impact. We hope that the government will not make the same mistakes they did when choosing the Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism."

Many innocent lives have been lost due to violent extremism and it is vitally important that we all work together to ensure that all forms of extremism are eradicated so that no one else is harmed. We know that there are valid concerns relating to the Prevent strategy and we urge everyone to raise them so that we can address the issues and develop a strategy that will be coherent and effective.

Ends

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Muslim Women's Network UK (www.mwnuk.co.uk) is the national leading Muslim women's charity working to improve the social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls.