

## **Rights & Security International's submission to the Women and Equalities Committee's call for evidence on 'Gendered Islamophobia'**

### **Summary**

1. In this submission, Rights & Security International encourages the Women and Equalities Committee to:
  - a. Recommend that the government scrap its counter-extremism strategy, 'Prevent', due to the strategy's Islamophobic impacts – including those gendered impacts we outline in this submission;
  - b. Continue using the term 'Islamophobia', rather than using less comprehensive phrases such as 'anti-Muslim hatred'. Using the latter phrasing in law and policy could leave significant gaps in thinking about protection from everyday discrimination and other harms;
  - c. Ensure that the government deploys available legislation, such as the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998, to protect Muslims and people perceived as Muslim from Islamophobia; and
  - d. Recommend that the government consider the impact of its policies and legislation – particularly those related to counter-terrorism and counter-extremism – on Muslims, and particularly intersectional impacts with gender.

### ***What impact does Islamophobia have on women and girls, their communities and wider society?***

- i. Prevent and Islamophobia: An overview*
2. The primary focus of this submission is the UK government's counter-extremism strategy, 'Prevent', which is one of the most egregious examples of institutionalised Islamophobia in law and policy. The programme also has well-evidenced human rights harms that particularly impact Muslims and Muslim communities, yet successive governments have repeatedly ignored these harms.
3. 'Prevent' is one element of the government's counter-terrorism strategy, 'CONTEST', which the government purportedly uses to stop people from being 'drawn into terrorism'.<sup>1</sup> When a member of the public – most often a public sector worker subject to the legally-binding 'Prevent duty' (such as a teacher, doctor or social worker) – becomes concerned that somebody they know may hold 'extreme' views, they are obligated to refer the case to the police for scrutiny under Prevent. The police then investigate and decide on the case's next steps, which can include referring the individual for Channel intervention. Based on our research, we have concluded that the potential outcomes of Prevent and Channel can include serious consequences such as criminal investigations, intelligence

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<sup>1</sup> HM Government, 'Prevent Strategy', Cm 8092, June 2011: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a78966aed915d07d35b0dcc/prevent-strategy-review.pdf>.

agency involvement or engagement from social services.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, most Prevent referrals are ultimately ‘signposted’ to health, social, educational or other services – or, the authorities decide that no further engagement is required.<sup>3</sup> In other words, when people are referred to Prevent, the authorities most often conclude that they not dangerous – meaning that referrals can cause distress and other harms for no purpose.

4. Prevent is inherently Islamophobic in the sense that it has directly reinforced suspicions and fears of Muslims, and insofar as it invites citizen-to-citizen surveillance in a society where prejudice against Muslims is a known, pervasive problem; it has had this problem from the outset.
5. When the government formulated the Prevent strategy in 2006, it explicitly chose to mark only Muslim communities for Prevent intervention.<sup>4</sup> Despite the various changes Prevent has gone through since its inception, and despite the strategy’s now broader focus on various forms of ‘extremism’, it still disproportionately impacts Muslims and Muslim communities, as explained below.
6. In our view, it is telling that the Prevent duty does not apply in Northern Ireland – the region of the UK with by far the most extensive and deadly history of politically motivated violence, and one where paramilitary groups remain active. If Prevent is truly equally concerned with potential ‘terrorism’ or ‘extremism’ by people with any identity (or perceived identity), then the decision not to apply the Prevent duty to a region with serious, ongoing sectarian tensions and violence makes no sense.
7. Instead, the available evidence raises concerns that Prevent referrals are often driven by Islamophobia. In the year ending March 2024 (the most recent year for which government statistics are available), cases involving alleged ‘Islamist extremism’ accounted for 13 per cent of all referrals and 23 per cent of all Channel cases.<sup>5</sup> However, people identifying as Muslim account for only roughly 6.5 per cent of the population of England and Wales.<sup>6</sup> (We use England and Wales statistics because the Home Office’s statistical release on Prevent includes only data for England and Wales; Prevent applies differently in Scotland and, as noted, does not apply in Northern Ireland.) Evidently, there is an over-representation of Muslim-identifying people within Prevent.

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<sup>2</sup> See Rights & Security International, ‘Caught in the Web: ‘Prevent’ databases and the policing of children’ (2025): [https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Prevent\\_database\\_report.pdf](https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Prevent_database_report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Home Office, ‘Individuals referred to Prevent: to March 2024’ (5 December 2024):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-prevent-to-march-2024>.

<sup>4</sup> See Department for Communities and Local Government, ‘Preventing violent extremism – Winning hearts and minds’, April 2007: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance/prevent-duty-guidance-for-england-and-wales-accessible>.

<sup>5</sup> Home Office, ‘Individuals referred to Prevent: to March 2024’ (5 December 2024): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-prevent-to-march-2024>.

<sup>6</sup> Office for National Statistics: ‘Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021’ (2022): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=There%20were%20increases%20in%20the,%2C%201.5%25%20in%202011.>

8. The available evidence does not support a conclusion that this seeming over-representation of Muslims (or people perceived as Muslim) is justified. First, in correspondence with the Government Legal Department (available upon request) and through freedom-of-information requests, RSI has learned that the government does not systematically collect data about the impact of Prevent/Channel on any particular group sharing a protected characteristic (other than gender and age groups). In other words, the government does not know what percentage of people impacted by Prevent/Channel referrals identify as Muslim – a deeply troubling omission, and one that means that any government assertions about Prevent/Channel being non-discriminatory would not be based on established fact. (We note here that the number of cases allegedly involving ‘Islamist’ ideologies does not necessarily correspond to the number of cases involving Muslims, due to gaps and potential inaccuracies in the government’s records as well as the fact that anyone can be suspected of holding a particular ideology.) The government simply does not have the data it would need to assess whether disparate impacts are occurring and, if so, whether those disparate impacts can be justified.
9. Rather than collecting the data about religious identity, the government, in equality impact assessments that are available from RSI, has simultaneously tried to justify any disproportionate impact of Prevent and Channel on Muslims, while also suggesting that Muslims do not present a disproportionate security threat. These contradictory statements give rise to concerns that the government has not examined the question seriously.
10. By contrast, the design of the Prevent programme leads to a real risk that the impact on Muslims is *not* justified. The Prevent programme allows referrers to rely on mere suspicions (without evidence) when making a referral, inviting reliance on assumptions and biases. It also directly cues referrers to consider the relevant individual’s religion, race and other protected characteristics, while failing to take specific steps to deter discrimination.
11. Regarding reliance on mere suspicions or feelings: Prevent referrals do not require any kind of evidence that an individual poses a threat or holds certain beliefs. Moreover, referrers who receive official government Prevent training are frequently told to follow their ‘gut feelings’ and to refer an individual to Prevent if ‘something doesn’t feel right’: phrases that virtually invite conscious and unconscious biases to come into play, and that do nothing to deter them.<sup>7</sup>
12. These assumptions and biases include those about what Muslims think or believe, and in our view these assumptions and biases are likely a key reason for the outsized impact of Prevent that British Muslim communities describe. For instance, the Home Office asks people to refer others to Prevent based on factors such as a ‘changed appearance’, or because they have begun to engage more with their religion.<sup>8</sup> This guidance suggests that,

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g. Act Early, ‘Signs of radicalisation – what to look for’ (no date): <https://actearly.uk/spot-the-signs-of-radicalisation/what-to-look-for/>. Act Early is run by Counter-Terrorism Policing. For more information, see Amnesty International, ‘This is the Thought Police’: The Prevent duty and its chilling effect on human rights’ (2023): <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/united-kingdom-prevent-thought-police-2023>, pp. 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> ‘National Prevent referral form’ (2024): <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66969216ce1fd0da7b592672/Prevent+National+Referral+Form+-+Static+PDF.pdf>; Act Early, ‘Signs of radicalisation – what to look for’ (no date):

in the government's eyes, the outward portrayal of religious beliefs is suspicious and that people who choose to publicly express their religious identity could be at risk of being 'drawn into terrorism'. While language such as 'changed appearance' is neutral on its face, the Committee will be aware that in UK society, changes to appearance or attire are more commonly associated with an increasing devotion to Islam (e.g. facial hair, head coverings, long garments) than with, for example, increasing devotion to Christianity. Similarly, greater engagement with religion will often be more perceptible to others where Muslims are concerned (e.g. due to practices of praying multiple times per day at designated times). Therefore, there is a clear risk that this apparently neutral language is, or will be interpreted as, code for Muslims and Islam.

13. Regarding cueing: We see that the government advise people making referrals to think proactively about protected characteristics when considering or making a referral. The model Prevent referral form – which is optional, but which most practitioners fill out and send to the police when making a referral – specifically solicits information about, *inter alia*, date of birth or approximate age, 'Gender', 'Ethnicity', 'Nationality', 'Religion', and 'Disability'.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the government is prompting referrers to think about – and provide – a great deal of information about people's protected characteristics. Asking referrers to proactively think about protected characteristics potentially triggers conscious and unconscious biases, which, alongside the ability to refer based on mere 'hunches', creates an environment in which referrers may well base their referrals on prejudice.
14. This cueing and encouragement to rely on hunches, even without evidence, is not accompanied by any sufficiently strong measures to deter discrimination. For example, to our awareness, government guidance or training on Prevent does not ask people to be aware of potential biases they or others may have, or reflect any active thinking on the part of the government about how to avoid triggering bias in practice. Nor do the guidance or trainings explain how terms such as 'changed appearance' should be interpreted to avoid referrals influenced by prejudice.
15. In our view, these factors, combined with widespread negative public and media attitudes towards Muslims and Islam, make it virtually inevitable that Prevent will operate in an Islamophobic way.<sup>10</sup>
16. Any over-representation of individuals from Muslim communities in the Prevent strategy would mean that Muslims are more likely to suffer the long-term impacts of a referral. As we document in our 2025 report, *Caught in the Web: Prevent databases and the policing of children*:

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<https://actearly.uk/spot-the-signs-of-radicalisation/what-to-look-for/>. Act Early is run by Counter-Terrorism Policing.

<sup>9</sup> Home Office, 'National Prevent Referral Form' (2024): <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66969216ce1fd0da7b592672/Prevent+National+Referral+Form+-+Static+PDF.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> On statistics, see More in Common, 'How prevalent is anti-Muslim prejudice in the UK?' (3 March 2024): [https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/blog/how-prevalent-is-anti-muslim-prejudice-in-the-uk/#:~:text=While%20progress%20has%20been%20made,a%20negative%20view%20of%20Muslims](https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/blog/how-prevalent-is-anti-muslim-prejudice-in-the-uk/#:~:text=While%20progress%20has%20been%20made,a%20negative%20view%20of%20Muslims;); Jim Waterson, 'Most UK news coverage of Muslims is negative, major study finds' (*The Guardian*, 9 July 2019). For a summary, see Amnesty International, 'This is the Thought Police': The Prevent duty and its chilling effect on human rights' (2023): , pp. 30-31. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/united-kingdom-prevent-thought-police-2023>, pp. 30-31.

- a. The Prevent process is run by secretive ‘intelligence’ units (Fixed Intelligence Management Units) within the police, which collate large quantities of data about people referred.<sup>11</sup> We have found that the police use Prevent data as a form of ‘intelligence’ – that is, a way to gather large dossiers of information about people – rather than as a form of ‘safeguarding’ (as the government and the police describe the programme).
- b. The police are also empowered to ‘disrupt’ and ‘undermine’ the ‘status/credibility’ of people referred to Prevent, while ‘limit[ing] their activity’.<sup>12</sup>
- c. Prevent data can be reach the immigration authorities, job centres and many other public bodies, creating long-term impacts for people engaging with public services.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Counter Terrorism Policing, ‘Secure Systems Administrator – Fixed Intelligence Management Unit – Police Staff – Counter Terrorism Policing NW’ (Counter Terrorism Policing, no date): <https://www.counterterrorism.police.uk/careers/secure-systems-administrator-fixed-intelligence-management-unit-police-staff-counter-terrorism-policing-nw/>; British Transport Police, ‘Fixed Intelligence Management Unit (FIMU) Officer’ (British Transport Police, no date): <https://btp.tal.net/vx/mobile-0/appcentre-External/brand-4/candidate/so/pm/6/pl/1/opp/2655-Fixed-Intelligence-Management-Unit-FIMU-Officer/en-GB>; Document Number NCTPHQ/ICT/218 QRG, 30 May 2018; Metropolitan Police, ‘Freedom of information request reference no: 01.FOI.20.20.015862’, no date; Jason Hogg, ‘Preventing Future Deaths response of the Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police’, letter to The Rt Hon Sir Adrian Fulford PC KC, 15 July 2024: <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024-0276-Response-from-Thames-Valley-Police.pdf>; Suffolk Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub, ‘Procedures’, v6, July 2022: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/62ea37b2f412d231ae2c2f35/t/6363e811d2d43415ba782218/1667491861115/MASH-SOP.pdf>; Lancashire Constabulary, ‘Standard Operating ‘CTPNW 003-24 Intelligence Management Unit – Detective Sergeant’ (Tal.net, October 2024): <https://lancashireconstabulary.tal.net/vx/lang-en-GB/mobile-0/appcentre-3/brand-4/candidate/so/pm/6/pl/1/opp/6043-CTPNW-003-24-Intelligence-Management-Unit-Detective-Sergeant/en-GB>

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g. Bedfordshire Police, ‘ERSOU Counter Terrorism – Prevent Sergeant / Staff Supervisor (PO1) – 11286’ (Tal.net, November 2022): <https://tri-force.tal.net/vx/lang-en-GB/mobile-0/appcentre-3/brand-3/xf-ca9ca4f25ac7/candidate/so/pm/6/pl/1/opp/11286-ERSOU-Counter-Terrorism-Prevent-Sergeant-Staff-Supervisor-PO1-11286/en-GB>; Counter Terrorism Policing Headquarters, ‘The Counter-Terrorism Case Officer Guide’ (7 December 2020): <https://www.npcc.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/publications/disclosure-logs/counter-terrorism-coordination-committee/2024/028-2024-ctco-guide-redacted-07032024.pdf> pp. 81-82.

<sup>13</sup> For more information, see Home Office, ‘National Law Enforcement Data Programme Law Enforcement Data Service (LEDS) – Privacy Impact Assessment Report’ (July 2018): [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/721542/NLEDP\\_Privacy\\_Impact\\_Assessment\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721542/NLEDP_Privacy_Impact_Assessment_Report.pdf), para. 4.5. To see how data reaches these other databases, see Rights & Security International, ‘Caught in the Web: ‘Prevent’ databases and the policing of children’ (2025): <https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/impact/entry/caught-in-the-web-prevent-databases-and-the-policing-of-children>, pp. 44-57.

- d. The police can also share Prevent data with the person's employer and education provider (as well as possible future providers), causing long-term impacts for people's education and employment.<sup>14</sup>

17. Prevent also impacts people who have not been referred, but fear that they could be referred due to their beliefs or identity, should they decide to express these publicly.<sup>15</sup> People identifying as Muslim, or interested in Islam, are particularly likely to self-censor due to Prevent. In our 2022 report, *Prevent-ing Dissent: How the U.K.'s counterterrorism strategy is eroding democracy*, we (alongside Dr Zin Derfoufi of St. Mary's University) documented how the strategy has caused people – particular people who identify as, or are perceived to be, Muslim – to self-censor. One academic who was interviewed for the report said:

*'There are countless other examples of younger Muslim kids talking about how they've – whether it be [secondary school] kids I used to teach or kids that I've met at events that I've been talking [at] – who will say they haven't felt confident to speak out in class.'*<sup>16</sup>

18. Further, in 2018, a study by academics at the School for Oriental and African Studies found that:

*'Prevent appears to have the effect of discouraging free speech within universities. Students and staff tend to self-censor their discussions to avoid becoming the object of suspicion and are sometimes discouraged from exploring, researching or teaching about Islam, especially when linked to terrorism, fundamentalism or military conflict.'*<sup>17</sup>

19. Indeed, this Committee has already documented the self-censorship Prevent causes within Muslim communities. In its 2015 report, *Employment Opportunities for Muslims in the UK*, the Committee found many Muslims were 'reluctant to engage with us [the Committee] for fear that our enquiry was part of the Prevent programme'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Counter Terrorism Policing, 'Purpose Specific Data Sharing Agreement (DSA) Between SO15 Local Operations And Lewisham Local Authority', CTP-CA-132 (22 September 2020): [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/preventchannel\\_data\\_management\\_32/response/2297183/attach/5/PLPP%20DSA%20v1%2013%20LA%20signed.pdf?cookie\\_passthrough=1](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/preventchannel_data_management_32/response/2297183/attach/5/PLPP%20DSA%20v1%2013%20LA%20signed.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1) p. 6

<sup>15</sup> See Zin Derfoufi and Rights & Security International, 'Prevent-ing Dissent: How the U.K.'s counter-terrorism strategy is eroding democracy' (2022): [https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Prevent-ing\\_dissent\\_How\\_the\\_UK's\\_counter-terrorism\\_strategy\\_is\\_eroding\\_democracy.pdf](https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Prevent-ing_dissent_How_the_UK's_counter-terrorism_strategy_is_eroding_democracy.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> See Zin Derfoufi and Rights & Security International, 'Prevent-ing Dissent: How the U.K.'s counter-terrorism strategy is eroding democracy', p23, (2022): [https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Prevent-ing\\_dissent\\_How\\_the\\_UK's\\_counter-terrorism\\_strategy\\_is\\_eroding\\_democracy.pdf](https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Prevent-ing_dissent_How_the_UK's_counter-terrorism_strategy_is_eroding_democracy.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Guest et al, 'Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: perceptions and challenges' (2020): <https://www.soas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/Islam%20and%20Muslims%20on%20UK%20University%20Campuses%2C%20perceptions%20and%20challenges.pdf>, p. 6, para. 3.6.

<sup>18</sup> House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 'Employment opportunities for Muslims in the UK', Second Report of Session 2016-17, HC 89: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/89/89.pdf>, para. 25.

## *ii. Gendered Islamophobia in Prevent*

20. Prevent's Islamophobia also has gendered impacts, both in terms of actual referrals and the *fear* of a referral. With regard to the latter, self-censorship uniquely affects Muslim women, as fear of scrutiny may deter them from seeking support from public services or reporting crimes, for example.<sup>19</sup>
21. Prevent also has implications for Muslim women who choose to display their religious identity, such as women who wear the hijab, jilbab, niqab or burqa. This impact is due to the strategy's treatment of the outward portrayal of religious beliefs as a potential 'extremism' risk. For example, a young Muslim woman who decides, having not previously done so, to wear the niqab runs the risk of being flagged for Prevent intervention due to her 'changed appearance' (see above).<sup>20</sup> When surveillance is outsourced to the public, even to those who have received some training, the surveillance of Muslims who visibly display their religious beliefs is likely to be significantly greater than surveillance of those who do not.
22. The Committee should also consider the unique impacts that gendered Islamophobia has on men and boys. In the data that was current in March 2024, men and boys accounted for 78 per cent of all 'Islamist' Prevent referrals during the preceding 12 months, and for 92 per cent of all 'Islamist' cases discussed at a Channel panel.<sup>21</sup> The government, aware of the high percentage of men and boys referred to Prevent and subject to Channel, should have investigated this matter further, yet we are not aware of any official studies regarding these high figures. Muslim men and boys are more likely to suffer the long-term consequences of a referral, outlined above.
23. The outsized direct impact of Prevent on boys and men should not obscure the impact on women, and we submit that these gendered impacts of Prevent stem from stereotypes about gender roles in Muslim communities. Muslim women are seen as 'mothers' or as passive and oppressed: holding caring roles, with little to no power or choices about how to live their lives.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, these stereotypes see Muslim men as community leaders and in positions of power; men and boys are perceived as the 'threat' from a counter-terrorism perspective, whereas women and girls are often perceived as 'victims'.

### ***Are there any steps, including legislative, that the Government should take to help address Islamophobia?***

24. We must be clear that Prevent does not work: the government has never shown that it does, or that it 'works' better than rights-respecting alternatives would. It does not

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Sisters for Change, 'Unequal Regard, Unequal Protection' (2017): [https://www.equallyours.org.uk/sisters-for-change-report-unequal-regard-unequal-protection/#:~:text=Unequal%20Regard%2C%20Unequal%20Protection%20\(pdf,against%20BME%20women%20in%20England.](https://www.equallyours.org.uk/sisters-for-change-report-unequal-regard-unequal-protection/#:~:text=Unequal%20Regard%2C%20Unequal%20Protection%20(pdf,against%20BME%20women%20in%20England.)

<sup>20</sup> Home Office, 'National Prevent referral form' (2024): <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66969216ce1fd0da7b592672/Prevent+National+Referral+Form+-+Static+PDF.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Home Office, 'Individuals referred to Prevent: to March 2024' (5 December 2024): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-prevent-to-march-2024>.

<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International, 'This is the Thought Police': The Prevent duty and its chilling effect on human rights' (2023): <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/united-kingdom-prevent-thought-police-2023>, pp. 27-28

prevent acts of mass violence, as we saw during the August 2024 ‘riots’, and it does not prevent ideologically motivated violence, as we see in frequent misogynistic, transphobic or homophobic attacks in the UK. It does not protect Muslim and other minoritised communities from facing violence and hatred, as – again – we saw during the August 2024 ‘riots’. Ultimately, Prevent does not achieve its stated purpose of preventing violence, which is unsurprising, given that the government has never shown that the strategy is grounded in objective, peer-reviewed research about violence prevention. Worse, it fails while also institutionalising Islamophobia, including gendered Islamophobia. For these reasons, the Committee should call on the government to end Prevent and the ‘Prevent duty’.

25. The Islamophobic – including the gendered Islamophobic – impacts of Prevent are not limited to this one aspect of the UK’s counter-terrorism framework; rather counter-terrorism law and policy in the UK has historically disproportionately impacted Muslims. In some instances, this disproportionate impact has been intentional, as with the first iteration of Prevent, and given the government’s longstanding failure to end Prevent despite known problems of Islamophobia, these continuing discriminatory impacts could also be characterised as intentional: failing to address a known problem over the course of 20 years is a deliberate choice. After years of academic, media and civil society reporting, it cannot be the case that the government is unaware of the Islamophobia – gendered and otherwise – arising from its counter-terrorism and counter-extremism laws and policies.<sup>23</sup> The government should ensure that it measures and considers the impact of its laws and policies on Muslims, including their gendered impacts, both prior to and after creating them.

#### The term ‘Islamophobia’

26. Finally, we submit that the Committee should continue to use the term ‘Islamophobia’ to describe its inquiry, rather than terms such as ‘anti-Muslim hatred’, which we believe are insufficient to fully describe the issue.
27. Islamophobia is a set of discriminatory beliefs and behaviours that affect Muslim individuals and communities, as well as people who are not Muslim but who are perceived as such, in ways large and small – from physical violence to employment discrimination (whether conscious or unconscious); damaging everyday verbal aggressions and ‘othering’; stereotyping; dehumanisation through boundary-crossing questions, such as remarking that a Muslim woman coworker, casual acquaintance or service sector employee may be more employable if she doesn’t wear hijab; and a range of other acts that send a signal that Muslims do not fully ‘belong’ in the UK, are an item of curiosity (which can be dehumanising), or should be rejected or feared. To us, the term ‘anti-Muslim hatred’ appears too narrow, seeming to gesture only at explicit acts of verbal abuse, physical violence or other hostility.<sup>24</sup>
28. As well as encompassing such outright aggression, ‘Islamophobia’ captures more subtle harms that can persist across many aspects of life, as well as the structural, institutional

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<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Tufyal Choudhury and Helen Fenwick, ‘The impact of counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities’, Equality and Human Rights Commission, Research Report No. 72, 2011: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-72-the-impact-of-counter-terrorism-measures-on-muslim-communities.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> See United Nations, ‘International Day to Combat Islamophobia’ (*United Nations*, no date): <https://www.un.org/en/observances/anti-islamophobia-day>.



and societal biases that exclude and alienate Muslims, and that have pervasive and long-lasting effects. It extends beyond individual prejudice and encompasses systemic policies, legislation, media narratives and institutional practices that disproportionately disadvantage or marginalise Muslims, even when they do not incite direct hatred or violence. Recognising Islamophobia as a form of discriminatory bias is crucial to ensuring that laws, policies and public discourse do not reinforce the exclusion or mistreatment of Muslims in society.

29. Arguably, the Prevent strategy is an example that shows how Islamophobia is distinct from ‘anti-Muslim hatred’. Today, the programme may not entail expressions of open hatred or explicitly draw a target on Muslims, but it opens the door to the reporting of Muslims – with potentially lifelong consequences – based on biased fears. It also sends the signal that fear – phobia – is an appropriate way to regard one’s students, patients, clients, colleagues and neighbours, and that this fear should lead to a policing response. In doing so, the strategy fosters a society-wide climate of suspicion and repression, particularly in schools, healthcare and interactions with the state.
30. Given the Prevent strategy’s history of overtly targeting Muslims, the strategy could be regarded as fostering ‘hatred’ as well. At minimum, however, it enables expressions of bias and fear while doing little or nothing to counter them.
31. We are aware that some organisations and individuals have begun to advocate for the removal of the term ‘Islamophobia’ from public discourse, arguing that using the term silences critiques of harmful trends or practices that may emerge in Muslim communities. We respectfully disagree; one can debate whether a critique is Islamophobic (no matter where that critique originates or whom it targets), but in our view, to dismiss the term ‘Islamophobia’ altogether would risk obscuring the problems we have described in the preceding paragraphs.
32. Regardless of the outcome of this aspect of the discussion, we urge the Committee to ensure that any debates over terminology do not obscure the need to grapple with the Prevent-related and other harms we have described above.
33. We also urge the Committee to examine whether the government is sufficiently deploying existing equality and human rights legislation and mechanisms to prevent acts that harm Muslims and people perceived as Muslim. Earlier this year, the anti-hate-crime charity Tell MAMA published figures showing that Islamophobic assaults reported to them had risen by 73% in 2024 from the previous year,<sup>25</sup> while incidents of Islamophobic violence and hatred reached mainstream media during the August 2024 ‘riots’. Home Office data also shows that Muslims are more likely to be victims of hate crime in England and Wales than any other religious group.<sup>26</sup>
34. Such statistics highlight not only the prevalence of Islamophobic incidents against people in the UK, but also the urgent need for legislative and institutional recognition of

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<sup>25</sup> Aamna Mohdin and Chris Osuh, ‘UK Islamophobic assaults surged by 73% in 2024, anti-hate crime charity reports’ (*The Guardian*, 19 February 2025): <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2025/feb/19/uk-islamophobic-assaults-surged-by-73-in-2024-anti-hate-charity-reports>.

<sup>26</sup> Home Office, ‘Hate crime, England and Wales, year ending March 2024’ (2024): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024>.

Islamophobia as a form of discrimination – and enforcement that treats such discrimination with the gravity it deserves. Moreover, addressing this issue requires more than just condemning individual acts of hatred; it necessitates structural changes and proactive measures to combat Islamophobic discrimination in all its forms, including gendered Islamophobia, and send the signal that Muslims are just as much an integral part of UK society as anyone else.

### **About Rights & Security International**

Rights & Security International (RSI) is a registered charity that advocates that governments comply with human rights laws when they take measures in the name of national security. RSI has researched the Prevent strategy's human rights impacts for over ten years, and frequently publishes new information and analyses on its website.<sup>27</sup> We have long campaigned against Islamophobia and harms committed against Muslim communities and minoritised communities in the name of national security.

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<sup>27</sup> For more information, visit our website: <https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/>