

Empowering Muslim Girls? Post-feminism, Multiculturalism and the Production of the ‘Model’ Muslim Female Student in British Schools

Abstract

This paper draws on an analysis of the narratives of teachers, policymakers and young Muslim working class women to explore how schools worked towards producing the model neo-liberal middleclass female student. In two urban case study schools teaching staff encouraged the girls to actively challenge their culture through discourses grounded in Western post-feminist ideals of female ‘empowerment’. The production of the compliant ‘model Muslim female student’ appeared to be a response to the heroic Western need to ‘save’ the young women from backward cultural and religious practices. While this approach had many positive and liberating effects for the young women, it ironically produced forms of post-feminist ‘gender friendly’ self-regulation. The paper concludes with a black feminist intersectional analysis of race, religion, gender, sexuality and class in context of British multiculturalism and rising Islamophobia, exploring the contradictions of gendered social justice discourses that do not fully embrace ‘difference’ in educational spaces.

Key words: Muslim girls; intersectionality, post-feminism, female empowerment, multicultural schools; Islamophobia.

Introduction: Muslim girls in Islamophobic times

Schools represent important sites of social inclusion, citizenship and belonging for young Muslim women in Britain. However, and in particular since the high profile coverage of the radicalisation of three British-born Muslim school girls¹, their experiences are increasingly

lived through powerful, unrestrained Islamophobic discourses of ‘risk and fear’. In this paper, we report on the findings from our EU study on migrant school girls that involved two case study schools in inner London and included the narratives of 17 working class young Muslim women aged 16-19, their teachers and associated policy makers. We explore the ways in which these young Muslim women were subject to highly visible gendered surveillance and how schools worked towards producing the ‘model Muslim female student’ in opposition to what was seen as the backward everyday cultural practices and values within the Muslim community and family. In particular, we address how teachers’ perceptions of Muslims girls’ lack of agency translated into them devising routes for their ‘empowerment’ based on Western feminist, neo-liberal models of success and progress. The young Muslim women were commonly seen by teachers as a distinct racialised category of student in need of ‘saving’ from her religion, culture, and family through the invocation of post-feminist values of ‘gender equality, choice and freedom’ which they deemed would ‘enlighten’ and ‘uplift’ her out of her plight.

The wider gendered Islamophobic discourse plays out in our schools with real consequences for Muslim girls in their everyday school lives. To contextualise the problematized position they face it is important to consider how wider constructions of Muslim women in public discourse have taken shape amidst the backdrop of shifts in multiculturalism and the production of ‘dangerous’ Muslim ‘Others’. The reification of their cultural/religious difference, and in particular the preoccupation with their over-determined dress, has made them an Islamophobic signifier, symbolic of the ‘barbaric Muslim other’ that has existed in the contemporary Western imagination since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (Mirza 2013; Rashid 2016). Religious dress from the hijab to the jilbab and more recently, the burkini² have been the subject of virulent political, policy and media debate in Western societies, as symbols of Muslim women’s lack of agency, and more recently, as a threat to national security.

Similarly, cases of ‘ethnicised’ forms of gender based violence including honour crimes, forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), have featured in state multicultural discourses as evidence of backward and barbaric Muslim traditions and that represent their lack of civility relative to western models of gender equality (Author b and Author a 2007). More recently, there has been a heightened focus on young Muslim women of school age as the new ‘folk devils’ at risk of radicalisation becoming ‘jihadi’ brides. Groomed’ through social media, they are seen to be drawn by the excitement, romance and promise of immortality as ‘mothers’ of new Islamic caliphate (Shain 2010; Hoyle et al 2015; Saltman and Smith 2015, Mirza 2015a).

Feminist scholars have long problematized the efficacy of multiculturalism with regard to protecting the rights of women and girls in minority ethnic communities (Keddie 2014). Within multicultural approaches Muslim girls are constructed without any agency, as the ‘oppressed other’ in need of protection and thus open to pastoral intervention. Schools have been positioned at the forefront of identifying young women at ‘risk’ of violence and forced marriage and have received much state and public attention as a result of their failure in keeping girls ‘safe’ (IKWRO 2016). The introduction of state security interventions such as PREVENT, which places a public duty on schools to report those who are deemed to be at risk of becoming radicalised, adds another more regulatory and intrusive layer of surveillance of ‘dangerous’ Muslim young people deemed to be infiltrating British educational institutions (Shain 2013; Prevent 2011). As we will argue here, Muslim young women far from being ‘dangerous’ are actually ‘in danger’ of falling between the cracks of virulent racialised Islamophobic debates on the one hand, and racialised post-feminist discourses of female equality on the other, both of which play-out in the everyday microcosms of our multicultural British schools.

The ‘empowerment’ of Muslim girls: Schooling in post-feminist times

In this article we explore how westernized notions of female ‘empowerment’ informed teachers’ approaches to Muslim girls. The nuanced analysis of teachers’ positioning of Muslim young women as the ‘good Muslim girl’ and the ‘model student’ can be mapped onto wider racialised Eurocentric constructions of passive and assimilable ‘model ethnic minorities’ such as high achieving Indian and Chinese students (Bradbury 2013). The appearance of the ‘good Muslim girl in need of ‘saving’, converges with the interests of the ever-evolving liberal democratic state, who in this particular post-race and post-feminist moment sees itself as enlightened, progressive, open to gender equality, sexual difference and racial diversity while actually engaging in racist rhetoric and policies (Farris 2017).

However Muslim girls do not ‘fit’ the prototype of the liberated post-feminist subject since they are seen to ‘lack’ agency relative to other more visible white and black racialised girls. As Shain (2003) argues the representation of these young women as the over-controlled victims of oppressive cultures means it is a common experience for Asian and Muslim girls to be ignored or marginalised in classroom interaction because it is assumed that they are industrious, hardworking and get on quietly with their work. Zine’s (2006) study of Muslim girls in Canada shows how those who wear headscarves struggle with their teachers’ common assumptions that they are oppressed at home and that Islam does not value education for women. These assumptions then get translated into the girls’ experiences of low teacher expectations and streaming practices where they are encouraged to avoid academic subjects and stick to lower non-academic streams.

However, the mismatched perceptions between teachers and Muslim girls can be seen as a consequence of the effects of the post-feminist tensions which the young women come up

against at the intersection of Islamophobic and multicultural discourses that circulate in schools. The post-feminist moment, which it is argued informs and shapes our contemporary perspectives on gender equality, is premised on the popular belief that gender equality and sexual liberation has been achieved in western democratic societies, and that feminism as a political movement is now irrelevant, and should, like a ‘bad memory’ just fade away (McRobbie 2011). Post-feminism as a set of pervasive political and cultural discourses, interpellates the western female subject into notional forms of gender equity which are ‘concretized’ through young women’s access to education and employment, consumer culture and civil society. At the core of this ‘girl power’ is the powerful illusion of gendered meritocracy, in which educational and other social successes are seen to be achieved through individual effort and aspiration. However, the pervasive and popular post-feminist ideology, with its high-visibility ‘have it all’ tropes of freedom and equality for young women, far from being liberating represents a seductive new ‘sexual contract’ for this generation of young women who have bought into its neoliberal ideology. In the new ‘sexual contract’ hegemonic masculinity is skillfully re-secured as young women, recast as the ideal ‘docile subjects’, are interpellated through popular culture and discourses of ‘success, choice and empowerment’ into seductive new forms of gender inequality (McRobbie, 2007; Ringrose, 2012; Gill, 2007; Duits van Zoonen 2006). Far from being a feminist discourse, post-feminism represents the patriarchal disavowal of historical and contemporary gender injustices and its systemic structural inequities.

While the literature on post-feminist female agency addresses conceptualisations of empowerment for white and some black and South Asian females, it has failed to work with notions of agency within specific cultural and racialised contexts (Ali 2003; Butler 2013; Rashid 2016). As Rashid (2016) argues, young Muslim women occupy a different position in

relation to this new ‘sexual contract’ in that they are offered an opportunity to be ‘modernized’. She writes, ‘The post-feminist analysis is predicated on a particular middle classed whiteness. The asexual, repressed sexuality of Muslim women is in sharp contrast to these post-feminist hegemonies. Muslim feminists are regarded as acceptable because of the virulence of patriarchy in their religion. Muslim women can afford to be defeminized because of their religiosity’ (Rashid 2016:129). Clearly given the cultural and religious context, young Muslim women’s relationship with neoliberal post-feminist female ‘empowerment’ is different than for white western women. Muslim women who are culturally essentialised as valorizing motherhood and subject to the patriarchal heterosexual institutions of religion and family, are overlooked in terms of their unique ‘other’ forms of ‘choice and agency’.

Studies of young Muslim women’s agency show they are not simply buying into the educational mainstream (Mirza and Meeto 2014). Basit’s (1997) study of Muslim girls in England shows how teachers viewed British Muslim girls as lacking freedom at home which they could enjoy at school. However, in contrast to the teachers’ expectations they did not want the freedoms of the English girls, which they perceived as a symptom of parental neglect. Similarly Shain (2003) shows how the wearing of non-Western clothes to school is an important site for Muslim girls’ contestation of mainstream school identities, which they achieved through mixing Western and Muslim styles to create new ethnicities. The Muslim girls in Dwyer’s (1999) classic study saw veiling as liberatory, arguing that the veil offers women protection from the male heterosexual gaze. In another interpretation of Muslim girls’ agency Hamzeh (2011) found that while the restricted parental discourses of the ‘veil’ challenged their opportunities for learning, the young Muslim women contested the gendering discourses of the hijab by strategically adapting their dress and mobility in public places, including their physical behaviour around boys.

As the literature shows we cannot assume Muslim girls are simply ‘empowered’ through channelling their ‘apparent’ docility into routes to relative educational achievement. The assumption of many teachers and schools who have power ‘over’ Muslim girls is that individual personal educational aspirations ‘empowers’ them (Kabeer 1999; Keddie 2011). However, ‘empowerment’ is a troubled notion that assumes power is relational and any gains are oppositional and made in relation to the hegemonic culture. It assumes the positive power of a collectivity or individual to challenge the deep unequal structural power relations in society through self-expression, decision making, and redistribution of resources (Kabeer 1999). However, feminists have long argued ‘empowerment’ is a transformational process that, for women, must break down the boundaries between the public and private domain if it is to shift the distribution of social power in society (Yuval Davis 1994). As Rashid (2016) explains ‘empowerment’ in the post-feminist discourse obscures the structural inequalities that Muslim women experience as a result of their socio-economic and citizenship status.

Studying Muslim girls: An intersectional approach

The research discussed here was part of a larger five country European Union funded study³. Our British research was based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with 34 migrant girls, including 17 young Muslim women, their teachers, parents and policy makers (Mirza and Meeto 2011). The young women from two large urban state secondary schools were 16 to 19 years of age. ‘Hazelville’⁴ was a large mixed-sex state comprehensive school, with a highly diverse population in terms of class, ethnicity and the migration routes of students and their families. It was in a newly ‘gentrified’ area, where the majority of the pupils were still working class, mainly of African Caribbean heritage. The Muslim girls in Hazelville were

recent migrants and came from many different countries, including Somalia, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, and India. In contrast, 'Bushill' was an all-girls state secondary school located in an inner-city borough classified as one of the most economically disadvantaged in the country. Ninety-four per cent of the school's pupils were Muslim. The mainly Bangladeshi, and some Pakistani young women in the school reflected the low socio-economic status of the migrant population that defined the area. The school achieved highly in national inspection reports and also in academic performance, with significant numbers of students going on to higher education.

The interviews and focus groups among pupils, parents and policy makers were carried out in English by the research team, both of whom are women with migrant backgrounds with South Asian, Muslim and Caribbean heritages. Drawing on an insider/in-betweenness (Hamzeh 2011) and 'located' positionality (Mirza 2009) enabled us to operationalise an intersectional 'black feminist sensibility' (Meetoo 2016) in the research process. The theoretical possibilities offered by the black feminist epistemological concept of intersectionality enabled us to analyse the multiple dimensions of race, class, gender, sexuality and religion in the context of macro Islamophobic discourses that circulate in the West and how it is experienced at the micro level of young women's lived lives. It facilitated an examination of individualised and highly contextualised identities and social positioning in terms of time, place and other intersecting social locations (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006).

In the case of young Muslim women, an intersectional analysis provides the scope to examine processes of gendered racialisation in relation to sexuality, class and religion, amongst others such as age. Such an analysis of the interplay of multiple social positioning provides an opportunity to tease out the process by which categories are produced, experienced,

reproduced and resisted in everyday life. . For instance, some categories of difference may be troubled in some contexts and not others. For example, the religious identity of Muslim girls in schools can be seen as negative and constraining in contrast to the home, where it is seen as a positive attribute by the family and girls themselves (Fanceschelli 2017; Ramji 2007). Furthermore, an intersectional approach can allow for an understanding of ruptures and signs of resilience or resistance among the Muslim young women.

Unveiling the ‘good Muslim girl’: Policing the veil and regulating ‘honour’

Muslim young women were often subject to teachers’ expectations about what it means to be a ‘true’ and ‘good’ Muslim girl, which was particularly manifested through bodily regulation and dress. There was often little understanding or respect for the girls’ faith and religious expression of humility and honour (izzat) in their choice of dress, or for their agency and self-determination in their own negotiated educational paths to empowerment. Among the mainly white middleclass teachers in both schools there was a preoccupation with the symbolic meaning of the headscarf. While wearing the headscarf was reluctantly accepted by many teachers as ‘a given’ in a multicultural school context, the young women recounted many negative experiences linked to wearing religious dress.

In many of the teachers’ eyes, to be a ‘good Muslim girl’ meant being a ‘true Muslim’ and performing the ‘right kind’ of idealised proscribed femininity that they, in the West, perceived it to be. This was no more evident as in the case when one teacher, Jane, saw it as her duty to police the ‘correct’ wearing of the headscarf. For Jane, the Head of Inclusion at Hazelville, the Muslim female’s authenticity had to be measured through her headscarf:

My issue is Muslim girls, in particular, wearing a headscarf with big earrings, and actually the two are mutually exclusive, because the headscarf is about being modest isn't it? It's about not drawing attention to yourself, because you are there as a

vehicle for God, not as a body yourself, right? I understand that these students are tremendously conflicted about their place within society.. And the reason I do that, it's partly because I want them to be proud of who they are. (Jane, British, white middleclass, Hazelville, Head of Inclusion)

In Jane's view young Muslim women who wear the headscarf, whether out of choice or not, should perform the fixed utopian Muslim femininity that she 'knew'. For Jane there is no accommodation; her authoritative gaze was grounded in her 'rightful' knowledge of Islamic religious identification. The headscarf, as a signifier of Islam, was an 'identity site' where some teachers not only felt free to openly contest the young Muslim women's religious identity, but also use it to regulate their emerging sexuality.

In the schools the young women's faith constantly had to be tested. In many cases the headscarf was not taken seriously, seen as merely an outward display of imposed necessary religiosity- a facade behind which the girls hide their true post-feminist rebellious 'self'. Secretly 'taking it off' or using it 'to clean' were forms of derision used to minimise or undermine the headscarves seemingly imposing and threatening physical presence. For example, one teacher told the girls they could remove it on a hot day as their parents were not looking. It was as if, given the opportunity, the girls would relinquish the burden and 'take it off' as Aisha explains:

There are a few teachers who, like, I wouldn't say they have a problem with our faith, but they do make a few comments which sometimes I just think are unnecessary.... You know like it's been quite hot the past week and stuff, the teacher would say something like, 'Are you not so hot with your scarf? Why don't you take it off? I won't tell your mum'. It's like we wear it for our parents, but we don't. (Aisha, 2nd generation Bangladeshi migrant, Bushill)

However, there were other less oppositional encounters with Muslim female dress in the schools. Unlike Hazelville, where the headscarf was the exception, at Bushill the hijab was part of the uniform worn by most of the girls. This normalisation of Muslim dress and values within the school was seen as providing a ‘safe space’ for the Muslim majority, as Katie the Deputy Head, explains:

The girls and their communities themselves are quite marginalised, so it's by sticking together that they get strength, so they look after each other because the world outside isn't necessarily as welcoming and friendly. So we are like a haven for them, and often a haven from their community and their families, actually, as well as from the world outside the family. So they have that to think of (Bushill) as a safe place. (Katie, British white middleclass, Deputy Head, Bushill)

However, within this gendered Muslim ‘haven’, the embodied relationship between sexuality, dress and academic achievement was still feminised and policed in the school. Katie continues:

There are certainly girls who are cooler than others; you know, there's always the fashionable girls. But I think you have a real sense here of students making choices, so the students, the girls are kind of aware that if they choose to spend endless hours on makeup and clothes, fashion, boys, then they are not going to do as well academically, and you kind of see them making that choice. (Katie)

Within the prevalent post-feminist discourse which valorises choice and freedom of expression for young women, it was ironic that young Muslim women’s subversive expressions of their emerging sexuality through ‘choice’ of dress and style were seen to be at odds with an academic identity and being ‘good’ at school.

Bullying in ‘post-feminist’ times: Surviving everyday religious racism and racialised sexism

Though the young Muslim women’s subjection to the embodied surveillance of their dress and religious ‘honour’ was prevalent in the cultural and social space of the school, we found their immediate and overwhelming concern was the rampant religious racism and racialised sexist bullying at the hands of their peers. This was overlooked by the teachers, whose focus tended to be on the young women’s cultural restrictions and the production of ‘good’ neoliberal subjects. In Hazelville racialised sexual bullying and mental well-being was a striking area of concern among the young Muslim women who reported a high incidence of depression, eating disorders, self-harm, including attempted suicide.

Shani, a refugee from Burundi was the only girl who wore a niqab in her school. She explained her mother was poor and could not afford fashionable clothes. She was picked on as ‘ugly’ and ‘stupid’, and brutally bullied during her years at secondary school.

Everyone used to look down on me and...I don’t know, I think because, like, I don’t fit in, because I don’t fit in with the trends. I don’t have the nice new trainers, I don’t fit in with what they do and stuff like that (Shani, 1st generation Burundi, Hazelville)

Shani was seen as the irredeemable opposite of the ‘good Muslim girl’. She was quiet, withdrawn and truant from school. Though her behaviour signalled deeper problems, the teachers had ‘given up on her’, explaining she was a ‘waste of time’ and even told us ‘don’t bother to interview her’. But her voice was clear:

Teachers should recognise that if a person's not speaking and someone is always picking on them and making sly comments, they shouldn't just leave it... when a student is bunking, or missing lessons and stuff, there's a reason behind it.” (Shani)

It was evident from the young women's narratives that skin colour acts an important trigger for bullying. Jamelia, a young Muslim woman from Sierra Leone spoke of how she was 'cussed about her skin colour' by students from different ethnic backgrounds. Such 'cussing' or 'disrespecting' was clearly highly racialised and sexualised:

They were mixed, black, black African, black Caribbean, black British, all mixed...they mainly cussed me because they said my skin colour's really, really dark. They would use this word called Blick...or say I was really, really, dark, they used to compare me to like charcoal and all those things. And sometimes the boys, mainly the boys, I think that's the main one, black on black, because most blacks think – oh we are better than other blacks – if you know what I mean? (Jamelia, 2nd generation refugee, Sierra Leone, Hazelville)

Miriam from Afghanistan spoke of being sexually policed by males in her community who knew how to hurt her by leveraging threats to damage her reputation. In the following extract she recounts how a younger Afghani boy in the school was following her and reporting her 'bad' behaviour to her father:

[He was] saying bad words...saying things that are not true, to people, like from in my family...they said your daughter is with boys, hanging around with black boys, and sitting in the car...thank God my father didn't trust them. Because, I mean, the teacher was involved in this, even went up to my dad and said this was mis-accusations...and I never had a relationship with him, he's just a guy from there, and he just keeps on observing every move I make. (Miriam 1st generation refugee, Afghanistan, Hazelville)

Though some teachers did personally intervene to protect young women from honour-based familial tensions and violence at home, the students at Hazelville universally felt the school did not deal with school based racist and sexist bullying effectively

If there is one person in the year or class that starts on the new person, or the person who is a different culture, or ethnic background, and the teacher doesn't do anything about it...I'm not sure if it's the training, or they just don't care (Gita, 1st generation migrant, India, Hazelville)

This echoes research by Tippett et al (2010) who found that a common cause of ineffective intervention in bullying is the teacher's poor understanding of diversity. With the school priority on PREVENT and safeguarding the young women from their own communities, solving this more immediate endemic school based problem seemed a distant dream.

'Saving' Muslim girls: Education for 'Empowerment and Enlightenment'

Muslim young women were often perceived 'at risk' by the school from the heightened sexual regulation from their family and community. In their narratives teachers, parental liaison and welfare staff were often focused on cases of forced marriage and other forms of patriarchal gender control. Such surveillance was tied to the young women's regulation of their embodied sexuality and can be partially understood through notions of 'honour and shame' (*izzat*), which feature highly in public discourses on women of South Asian and Muslim background (Haw 2009; Franceschelli 2017). However Black and South Asian feminist researchers have troubled the bias of simply problematising sensationalist incidences of community regulation highlighting the complexities of more subtle forms of regulation

that reach beyond culture and the home (Mirza 2010; Shain 2003; Puwar 2003; Ahmad 2004).

The schools intervened in everyday cultural practices by working towards producing the ‘model Muslim female student’. Teachers, mentors and parent liaison officers would encourage the young women to actively challenge their culture, drawing on Western ideals of female ‘empowerment’ to do so. Bushill, renowned for its success in raising the achievement of its predominantly nearly all Muslim female population employed Muslim pastoral staff to nurture the young women so they could attain the ‘right’ white middleclass cultural capital to behave in ways that are recognised in the wider world of higher education, and subsequently the world of work. For instance, the young women actively participated in country-wide conferences, such as the ‘Model UN’. They completed work experience in high-profile legal and banking companies in the neighbouring financial hub of the city. The young Muslim women appeared to be confident speakers and in touch with current affairs concerning themselves as young Muslim women, and with broader international issues, such as global warming, and HIV and AIDS. Their competence and confidence was impressive, they made trips to the theatre to see Shakespeare and open days at various well-known universities. Ali explains how the school worked towards producing the ‘model Muslim female student’:

They became enlightened, they talk on a different strata, they talk about different matters, not kitchen sink things. They talk philosophical matters, they talk about international affairs, human tragedy, geographical things, history, politics, how the world is changing, what is their role in it, they come and talk about, and that surprises me. I never think that they have that sort of brain, but they do have that sort of brain. (Ali, 1st generation migrant, male Bangladeshi, Parent Liaison Officer, Bushill)

Neela, a past pupil of Bushill was nurtured by the school as a role model to return as the Sixth Form Learning Mentor. She was specifically employed as a ‘cultural insider’ to help the young women secure highly sought-after places at the top Russell Group universities or gain work placements with nearby law firms and banks. Fully inducted into the schools’ assimilationist neoliberal ethos of overcoming Muslim female ‘cultural deficit’, she saw herself as an agent of change, defining her role as challenging the young women’s attitudes and cultural boundaries:

It’s not really in my job description to say, ‘you must get these girls outside of school, get them to meet those who are non-Bengali, who are White, who are Black, who are non-Asian, and even females as well’. But I felt that when I first started this role, this is something that has to change. So if I give you another job description of mine, it’s what I do in terms of getting the girls to socialise with other people, non-Muslim, non-females ... some of them won’t even shake a man’s hand, if you like. (Neela, 2nd generation Bangladeshi migrant, Learning Mentor, Bushill)

The school’s production of the compliant ‘model Muslim female student’ who could confidently ‘shake the hands of white men’, was underpinned by the impulse to enlighten the barbaric ‘other’, propelled by the heroic Western need to ‘save’ the young women from their backward cultural and religious ways (Abu-Lughod 2002; Spivak 1988). Encouraging the young women to draw on neo-liberal values was seen as the route to educational ‘uplift’ which would raise them out of their hapless plight. However, while the Muslim girls appeared to benefit positively from the school’s ‘gender equality’ approach, it also ironically produced subtle forms of ‘gender-friendly’ self-regulation (Robinson 2000) among the young women.

I think the school, even though they want us to make their own independent decision, they do help us in the way they want us to make our own decision, so by taking us to

all these universities, and speaking to the admission tutors, and professors there, in a way they help us in making the decisions. (Nadira, 2nd generation Bangladeshi migrant, Bushill)

Working-class young Muslim women like Neela and Nadira were psychically interpellated into the neo-liberal educational discourse of performativity and individuated success through forms of acceptable and compliant female identity, which was ‘performed’ through embodied practices and credentialist behaviours in school sites (Bradford and Hey 2007). The schools’ approach to gendered ‘empowerment’ appeared to be working at the first hurdle as many of the young women aspired to higher education. However, it is not their ‘empowerment’ but their *routes* into disempowerment and inequality through the post-feminist illusion of meritocracy that remains problematic. For them the barrier is the entrenched racist attitudes that prevent the young Muslim women from entering top-ranked jobs and institutions which remains intact and unchallenged.

The young Muslim women, brought into the trajectory of post-feminist, middle-class, neo-liberal individualism through their own newfound gendered and classed desires, aspirations, and values for success, found it was not often personally sustainable beyond the ‘safe haven’ of the school gates. Despite their impressive academic achievements, the young Muslim girls at Bushill struggled to gain and sustain places at Russell group universities. This is in keeping with a national deficit of Muslim students studying at Russell Group universities, the rate of which is particularly slow. Boliver (2016) found the success rates for students of Pakistani and Bangladeshi background were 30.3% and 31.2% respectively compared to 57.4% for white students. Despite the illusion of meritocratic post-feminist enlightenment, access to educational opportunities and labour market equity for young Muslim women is clearly not

an equitable level playing field (Farris and de Jong 2013). As Casey (2016:5) has recently noted in her review of minority ethnic integration in Britain, “Muslim girls (are) getting good grades at school but no decent employment opportunities”.

PREVENT-ing progress: ‘Dis-empowerment’, Islamophobic policy and surveillance

The schools struggled to deal with the cultural, religious and social issues faced by many of the young Muslim women without judging them against the dominant racist Islamophobic policy frame. The PREVENT counter terrorism strategy which positions young British Muslims as legitimate subjects for state intervention through surveillance, places schools at the forefront of monitoring and reporting students as potential terror suspects. As Coppock and McGovern (2014) explain schools and other child welfare agencies have a central role in the ‘soft’ policing of British Muslim children and young people by disciplining them through normalising technologies which reconstruct the Muslim child’s sense of ‘self’ in line with the interests of the state. So, what are the consequences of such heightened negative attention on Muslim girls and how does racism, religion, sexuality and gender intersect to impact on their well-being and life chances?

Muslim Girls have been largely overlooked in the ‘post-feminist’ complacency that there has been an overall improvement in their educational performance. Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls who are Muslims, and once amongst the lower educational achievers are now ‘outperforming’ their male and white counterparts in GCSE exams (DFE 2016). Similarly South Asian girls are increasingly likely to enter higher education (Shah et al 2010; Bagguley and Hussain 2016). However, such deeply gendered discourses mask the *real* educational difficulties faced by young Muslim women who are largely invisible in the multicultural discourses that frame approaches to minority ethnic pupils. Given the neo-liberal educational

emphasis on schools' performance and success (Ball 2010), the official public discourse manifests through policies aimed at the crisis of masculinity and disaffection for black and white working-class boys and the alienation and separatism for Muslim boys.

In our research the preoccupation with Muslim boys rather than girls was clearly articulated in the frank and open discussions we had with national policy makers. A 'gender perspective' was perceived as related only to girls, implying that targeted measures for boys were not gendered, but reflect a normative position. The dichotomy of masculine and feminine identity and behaviour amongst Muslim youth continued to be crudely separated in the PREVENT discourse and acted as a justification for its male focus:

The programme that was designed to address some of the issues wasn't really because there are gender issues, there were just more issues around that sort of clash of cultures, you know, lack of identity, their sort of feeling of, you know, alienation, risk posed by their sort of lack of their knowledge of their own faith. Those were more the issues, and I think those issues also apply to girls as well, but I think girls were just less likely to then get worked up, probably are radicalised, but are less likely to go on and probably commit, I don't think we've come across any, in our work, any young girls going on and committing a violent extremist act. (Gamal, Asian Male, Government Senior Policy Advisor)

When gender does arise in policy discourse in relation to Muslim girls, they are constructed as pathological victims of their culture, focusing on their familial and religious practices. Whereas gender equality is integral to school policy and schools must comply with legislative monitoring of pupils' attainment, where Muslim communities are concerned, the issues aimed at girls are almost always organically cultural. The only official government educational policy we found for Muslim girls was steeped in a narrow, racialised

preoccupation with Muslim parental cultural restrictions, such as wearing the veil or sex segregation, and a sensationalised political focus on ‘barbaric’ ethno-religious transgressions, such as forced marriage and FGM (female genital mutilation). When asked what gender policies are in place, the same senior policy advisor explains:

We did some work with the Home Office a couple of years ago, a big campaign, posters being sent out to all schools ... the Foreign Office have a Forced Marriage Unit, specifically dedicated to this, educating pupils about their rights, trying to educate the community. I know it's done some work around female genital mutilation, because that's quite prominent in Somali communities, and is a growing problem. A little bit of work has been done against the taboo in some of our Muslim community on first cousin marriages. (Gamal, Asian Male Government Senior Policy Advisor)

While educational policy must address the human rights violations of young women’s bodily rights, it is also crucial that policy perspectives move beyond stereotypical views of gendered violence in some communities and not others (Womankind 2011). White pupils also suffer from violence and familial abuses, but unlike Muslim girls, these are not seen as a cultural matter but as a social issue (Dustin and Phillips 2008; Mirza 2010). What we are witnessing here is the way in which Muslim young women are produced as abject, voiceless victims of their cultures and thus open to state surveillance in terms of cultural practice, but yet absent from the mainstream policy discourse which should protect them as equal citizens.

Conclusion: Beyond ‘Empowerment’ and the Post-feminist malaise

In a high profile visit to the flagship Mulberry girls' school in Tower Hamlets, the poorest borough in London serving a mainly Muslim intake, Michelle Obama launched her global

campaign ‘*Let Girls Learn*’, which aims to ‘empower’ 62 million girls still deprived of basic education. In her emotional address her voice broke with the message:

“With all folks say in the news, you wonder if people can see beyond your headscarf to who you really are instead of being blinded by their fear and the misperceptions of their own minds” (Michelle Obama in Weale and Khaleeli 2015).

Michelle Obama’s inspirational message to the ‘good’ Muslim girls of Mulberry was this: despite gender deprivation and attitudes, they too can achieve their dreams through academic success, confidence and fortitude. But the road to understanding the complexities of Muslim girls’ education in Britain is not simply about ‘empowering’ girls through access to a classroom and teacher, as in Afghanistan or sub-Saharan Africa. The challenge for us in multicultural Britain is how to move toward a sophisticated understanding of the way policy and practice systemically intersects with power and privilege to reinforce race, gender, social, sexual, cultural and religious inequalities in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

Drawing on a black feminist intersectional framework our study found young Muslim women’s gendered subjectivity and experiences in school were lived at the intersection of powerful post-feminist, and white liberal Eurocentric multicultural and Islamophobic discourses that circulated simultaneously in educational spaces. Their embodied raced and gendered subjectivities were shaped by experiences of surveillance and bodily regulation, which revealed the ways in which racism, patriarchy, religion, class, sexuality and gender and other interlocking systems of oppression simultaneously structured their cultural and social space in schools. In our study the schools’ production of the compliant ‘model Muslim female student’ appeared to be a response to the heroic Western need to ‘save’ the young women from their backward cultural and religious practices. Young Muslim women perceived to be at risk of heightened sexual regulation from their family and community were

actively encouraged to draw on Western ideals of female ‘empowerment’ and neo-liberal values characterised by post-feminist performativity and individuated success. Far from being a transformative identity, their journey into educational ‘enlightenment’ produced compliant feminised subjects who ‘performed’ docile credentialist behaviours that embraced the new seductive post-feminist ‘sexual contract’. Through their newfound gendered and classed desires, aspirations and values for success, working-class young Muslim women were encouraged to reject their cultural and religious values and move toward the ‘enlightened’ trajectory of middle-class neo-liberal individualism.

In conclusion we need to ask the question, ‘how can we move beyond ‘empowerment’ as the dominant language of female agency in neoliberal post-feminist multicultural contexts?’ Keddie (2014) suggests evolving a ‘justice politics’ in which Muslim women’s perceived ‘status subordination’ is not judged through the western liberal lens of regressive or progressive cultural identity. However caught up in the negative vortex of Islamophobia and the multicultural backlash, it was the young women’s ‘status subordination’ as religiously raced and gendered embodied beings that defined how they were socially constructed as victims in need of ‘saving’ from their culture, either by ridicule or intervention. However, in contrast to their teachers and mentors concerns about ‘empowering’ them, it was the virulent everyday racist and sexist bullying in the classroom by their male and female Asian, black, white and mixed race peers that framed their immediate everyday lives, but provided a nascent crucible for resistance by creating a space for dissent and possibilities of ‘coming to voice’.

Black feminism offers an epistemological critique of Eurocentric masculinist knowledge production and its liberal white feminist ‘hand-maiden’ that is post-feminist ideology. It speaks to the power and agency of oppressed peoples to shift the dominant paradigms of knowledge

production through struggles to assert ‘otherways of knowing’ and ‘being in the world’ that illuminates and challenges race, class and gender as intersectional systems of oppression (Mirza 2013). Rather than the malaise of the western post-feminist ‘gift of empowerment’ - with its promise of neoliberal success - a Black feminist ‘*politics of empowerment*’ (Collins 1990; Mirza 2015b) rooted in an Islamic feminist standpoint (Mirza 2012: 2014) provides a different paradigm for the young women. It illuminates the ‘potential power’ of young Muslim women’s embodied difference to disrupt staid post-feminist discourses that serve our ‘stuck’ white, male managerialist educational institutions and paves the way for ‘otherways of knowing’ and ‘being British’ that will, in time, transform our British schools.

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¹ 'UK police launch hunt for London schoolgirls feared to have fled for Syria', *The Guardian*, 20 February 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/20/fears-london-schoolgirls-isis-syria> accessed 19.01.17.

² There are many cross-cultural and national terms for the highly visible veiled dress Muslim women wear. There is the hijab or headscarf, the niqab (full length dress), the jilbab, burka and abaya (cloak which covers the whole body including the face). Recently the burkini (suit for swimming that covers the whole body except the face, the hands and the feet) was banned in France.

³ The project, '*Young Migrant Women in Secondary Education: Promoting integration and mutual understanding through dialogue and exchange*', was an 18month, five country transnational EU project (January 2010-July 2011). It was funded by European Commission European Fund for the Integration of Third-country Nationals: Community Action. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/young-migrant-women-in-secondary-education>

⁴ Hazelville was simultaneously a research site for one of the author's independent PhD research on South Asian girls (Meeto 2016).

