

Cameron's proposals for Muslim women are dangerous, dog-whistling nonsense

The government is proposing to protect migrant women by persecuting them. But then, they aren't the real audience for its policies



David Cameron talks at a mosque Photo: 2016 Getty Images

By Myriam Francois-Cerrah

4:05PM GMT 19 Jan 2016

The Prime Minister has reignited public debate over the integration of British Muslims by raising the contentious issues of gender segregation, face veils, and fluency in English – all framed as problematic barriers to community cohesion.

The announcement certainly buttresses the image of the PM as taking a tough line on Muslim integration. But the reality is there is in fact very little in today's address which wasn't already happening. Public institutions including schools and hospitals have already been issuing recommendations to staff on the non-wearing of face veils, particularly in cases of face to face contact with patients or pupils. The removal of face veils at borders is not only standard, but mandatory as part of identification. And while local councils have previously held meetings segregated according to gender, this is a very marginal issue, hardly worthy of a national debate and certainly unconnected to the struggle against terrorism, which these measures are avowedly

meant to be addressing.



Muslim women

The issue of learning English for new migrants, on the other hand, has long been a concern for campaigners. (Most Muslim women in the UK are not migrants, but never mind.) They point out that the latest measures will criminalise women, rather than assisting them, when in fact, massive cuts to local government funding has led to the closure of many of the very types of services designed to help migrant women learn English.

A case in point is this report from Eaves, a front line women's charity which, until being forced to shut down recently, ran shelters for domestic violence victims. Contrary to stereotypes, they found that large proportions of migrant women on spousal visas are highly educated, often with impressive employment histories – but that Britain's professed agenda of encouraging integration actually conflicts with the regulations in place. That is: these women are keen to work and to learn or improve their English, but policy prevents them from doing so.

For instance, the report listed huge hurdles to English lessons, with either no free courses or free courses only available to those who could access public funds – which, as spouses on five years' visa probation, these women could not.

"These are the policies of an isolated elite, ignorant of the

The PM emphasised the dangers of segregation and isolation, issues with which Muslims are certainly

actual problems faced by people in the real world"

familiar. Not because a small number of Muslims may struggle to speak English, but rather because 46 per cent of Muslims live in the most deprived 10 per cent of the country. Any government serious about isolation should start by addressing this disproportionate social deprivation.

And now, on top of all this, Cameron wants to actually deepen the precarity of migrant women's status, creating the conditions for mothers to be taken away from their children if their fail an English language test.

These are the policies of an isolated elite, ignorant of the actual problems faced by people in the real world yet bewitched by a phantasmagorical reimagining of themselves as purveyors of an egalitarian, feminist agenda. How would potentially taking away his mother from a vulnerable child help solve the issue of extremism? How exactly is this likely to ingratiate said vulnerable child to "western culture" – or, as I like to call it, his own country – if he is said to be struggling with its values?

The answer, obviously, is that it won't. You don't assist marginalised women by criminalising them.

But to call Cameron's reasoning ill-judged is to misread its intent. These announcements do speak to the audience they are actually aimed at, and that is not vulnerable Muslim women, but the anti-immigrant voices baying for political blood.

There are plenty of them around. The voices of real intolerance and hate – those who actually have the power to deport and criminalise people – are rising to a crescendo across Europe. On Sunday Czech president Milos Zeman said it was "practically impossible" to integrate Muslims into European society. Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orban said last year: "I think we have a right to decide that we do not want a large number of Muslim people in our country." Donald Trump's call for the deportation of Muslims, debated in Parliament this week, was at least up front in its bigotry.

We in the UK like our prejudice couched in a little more fluff. We prefer to cover it up in faux concern for the women at hand. But the same basic strategy of using Muslim women as a sacrificial lamb is at work: accept these deported immigrant women as a token gesture of "toughness" on immigration, and ignore whether it actually does anyone any good.

In such a climate, conflating Muslim women with immigrants, and immigrant Muslim women

with extremism, is not simply factually wrong but morally irresponsible. And to link the "isolation" of some Muslim women to extremism is to not simply isolate them further, but to entrench an implicit link between Muslim women and extremism. This at a time when Muslim women are increasingly targeted for hate crimes, as walking symbols of this new acceptable prejudice.

"We have to start by accepting that there are many ways to be British, not just one imagined by a white secular elite"

It's important to tackle that sense of isolation, not only among migrant women but everyone living at the fringes of our society. In the US, a study by Stanford University found that high school students saw large improvements in their grades and attendance records

when they enrolled in a class dedicated to exploring race and ethnicity. If we are serious about building "one nation", we have to start by accepting that there are many ways to be British, not just one imagined by a white secular elite. We don't need more "muscular liberalism" – we need less inequality, more investment in local communities and less criminalisation of those who depart from the narrow conception of British ideals put forward by a segregated and isolated political caste.

Myriam Francois-Cerrah is a broadcaster at TRTWorld and a writer for a number of outlets including the New Statesman and Middle East Eye. She is a Research Associate at SOAS Centre of Islamic Studies and a PhD researcher at Oxford university. She tweets @MyriamFrancoisC



How we moderate

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2016