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## Prevent Tragedies: A case study in female-targeted strategic communications in the United Kingdom's Prevent counter-terrorism policy

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### *Abstract*

While international revolutionary groups have frequently attracted international support, the declaration of the caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 and the subsequent growth of foreign fighters leaving their home countries to fight in Syria created a significant concern for Western governments. The United Kingdom was a major source of this foreign fighter flow, becoming a significant concern in 2014 and by 2015 accounting for some 700-760 fighters with the majority affiliated to the Islamic State and with a growing amount of females joining the group. While Prevent, the preventative pillar of the United Kingdom's counter-terrorism strategy, was in 2014 already well accustomed to intervening in cases of male radicalization, it was not well prepared to handle female radicalization. This article provides a case study of the UK police response to the above concerns. In 2014 the Metropolitan Police and Counter-Terrorism Policing HQ began work on the Prevent Tragedies campaign, a strategic communications campaign. The campaign sought to encourage women, primarily mothers, to talk with younger women and discourage them from travelling to Syria. It also sought to make these women aware of the government's Prevent policy, and to encourage them to submit reports to Prevent should be they concerned about the radicalization of persons close to them. Using documents obtained by Freedom of Information requests, and material gathered from the Prevent Tragedies website, this article explores how the idea of the "mother" as a nurturing and caring subject was utilized to try and counter female radicalization. It analyses how stereotypical ideas about pacific femininity and female political naivety were utilized to further the narrative of "groomed" women who were unaware of the brutal nature of Islamic state, and therefore could not have ideologically supported the organization when they travelled to Syria. While this undermines ideological support for Islamic State, it simultaneously draws on – and exposes – a current in U.K. counter-terrorism that underplays female radicalism, hampering our full understanding of gendered radicalization.

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### Introduction

Since 2003 the United Kingdom has used a four-pillared model of counter-terrorism, known as Contest. Contest has undergone a number of revisions since its initial release to the public,

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with policy changes being implemented in 2009, 2011 and 2018 (Skoczylis & Andrews, 2019). However, the structure of the policy has remained broadly the same, keeping the four pillars, Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare, which each dealing with a different aspect of counter-terrorism work.

Prevent, which this article focuses on, is a preventative policy that focuses on building resilience, intervening in cases of individual radicalization and countering terrorist ideologies in order to prevent support for or engagement in terrorism. A ‘strategic enabler’ of these objectives is communications, which is used to attempt to shift behaviour and thinking towards supporting Prevent objectives and decreasing support for terrorism (HM Government, 2008). Until 2011 Prevent was entirely focused on Muslim communities in the United Kingdom, with the assumption being that this was where the greatest risk of radicalization lay. While the policy post-2011 has broadened to looking at risk across the whole of society, the criticisms that Prevent securitizes the relationship between the state and British Muslims and that it perpetuates Islamophobia by creating an association between Muslims and terrorism remains (Skoczylis, 2015). This shift away from locating risk solely within the U.K. Muslim community additionally resulted in risk being located in individuals, rather than communities. However where threat assessments deemed it necessary, Prevent would continue to target certain communities more directly than others (HM Government, 2011b), a fact reflected in statistics released by the Home Office (HO News Team, 2018).

The declaration of the caliphate by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 (Byman, 2015) and the subsequent growth of foreign fighters leaving their home countries to fight in Syria (van Ginkel et al., 2016) created a significant concern and new challenge for U.K. counter-terrorism. The United Kingdom was a major source of this foreign fighter flow, by 2015 accounting for some 700-760 fighters with the majority affiliated to the Islamic State and with a growing amount of women joining the group (van Ginkel et al., 2016). This created an impetus to strengthen Prevent, with the government introducing the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (CTSA) in 2015 which broadened the scope of Prevent by including a statutory duty for public bodies to pay due regard to Prevent as part of their already existing

safeguarding duties (Acik, Deakin, & Hindle, 2018). Following this, the government increasingly linked counter-terrorism with safeguarding practices. Those who joined terrorist groups were presented as being infected with a kind of ideological contagion, with contact with charismatic extremists being understood as the primary cause of radicalization, and thus safeguarding was also presented as a kind of protection from ‘brainwashing’ in many spheres (Skoczylis & Andrews, 2019).

That a number of women were travelling to Syria to join ISIS also presented a challenge, with the government noting increasing concern about ‘examples of women, children and families buying into ISIL’s extremist narrative and travelling to live under their brutal regime’ in the 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy (HM Government, 2015, p.10). While Prevent was at that time already well accustomed to intervening in cases of male radicalization, it was not well prepared to handle female radicalization (Saltman, E & Smith, M, 2015). Thus, in 2014 the Metropolitan Police and Counter-Terrorism Policing HQ began work on the Prevent Tragedies campaign, a strategic communications campaign that sought to encourage women, primarily mothers, to talk with younger women and discourage them from travelling to Syria. It also sought to make these women aware of the government’s Prevent policy, and to encourage them to submit reports to Prevent should be they concerned about the radicalization of persons close to them. The article begins with an outline of female engagement with Prevent, with a broad overview of women and counter-terrorism, and the role of strategic communication in prevention. It then provides an overview and analysis of the Prevent Tragedies campaign, and follows this with a feminist oriented analysis, arguing that Prevent Tragedies draws on a current in U.K. counter-terrorism which assumes women are mostly peaceful, and thus useful to prevention for that reason. This leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes which disadvantage women, and disadvantage counter-terrorism, as such stereotypes limit the kinds of knowledge we can gather about gender and radicalization.

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## Methodology

This study uses documents drawn from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and primary source data drawn from the Prevent Tragedies website ([www.preventtragedies.co.uk](http://www.preventtragedies.co.uk)). Prevent Tragedies was set up in 2014 as a project jointly overseen by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and National Counter Terrorism Policing HQ (NCTP-HQ), then part of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). ACPO was succeeded by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) in April 2015 (NPCC, 2015). Therefore FOI requests were made to the NPCC and the MPS, requesting that both bodies release any emails, project documents and tender documents related to Prevent Tragedies. Initial scoping FOI requests indicated that emails and a general request for documents would fall beyond the cost limit of FOI requests. However, advice was given as to which documents would be readily available should a further request be made, As such, follow up FOI requests were made requesting specific documents from both the MPS and the NPCC, and project documentation was released. The resulting documents retrieved are listed in the Appendix. Additionally, materials were retrieved from the Prevent Tragedies website, which hosted much of the created materials. The website hosted videos, blog posts, leaflet PDFs and the outputs of other linked and partner campaigns. These outputs were downloaded. Analysis of these materials was conducted using NVIVO. A thematic discourse<sup>2</sup> analysis was undertaken, using a grounded theory methodology which used cycles of coding and recoding to generate codes and categories for analysis, before finally analysing the themes that emerged (MacMillian, 2005). This article understands Prevent Tragedies as a strategic communications campaign developed with clear objectives, in the context of young females travelling to Syria to support ISIS. It also however looks to understand that campaign within its wider social context, analysing it alongside feminist and radical feminist critiques of the state, society and patriarchy.

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<sup>2</sup> Discourse is understood here to be concerned with the social practice of language and semiotic systems, including the ways that language is used to build, manage and enact social identities, and maintain or challenge ideologies and structures of power (Blitvich & Bou-Franch, 2019)

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## Women and Prevent

As noted previously, Prevent was in 2014 well accustomed to intervening in cases of male radicalization, but not prepared to handle female radicalization (Saltman, E & Smith, M, 2015). However, this does not mean that women were absent from Prevent prior to 2014. Prevent from 2008 had frequently looked to Muslim women as part of its counter-terrorism work (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008). In this capacity women were primarily engaged as persons who could increase resilience within communities and families, with the 2008 Prevent guidance for local authorities noting that '[w]omen can be a particularity effective voice as they are at the heart not only of their communities, but also of their families' (HM Government, 2008, p.17). Further to this, in developing Prevent the government recognised that a number of social and political barriers faced women in public life, and that these would need to be overcome if more women were to engage with police initiatives (Metropolitan Police Authority, 2007). It therefore began to present issues of women's rights as a counter-terrorism concern, eventually creating a dichotomy between a government that would protect women's rights, and the terrorist that would destroy them (HM Government, 2015). Indeed many of the efforts to include women in Prevent prior to 2011, which included broad 'empowerment' work to better include Muslim women in art, education, employment and politics, were done with the assumption that women were more liberal and more peaceful than men (Brown, 2013) and thus bettering the representation of women in leadership and society would mean that they could provide better 'support for those at risk of extremist behaviour in their communities' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008a, p.42). This line of thought is present from the very beginning, and women have since the start of Prevent been presented as being better able to resolve conflict by virtue of supposed better communication skills and higher empathy skills (Metropolitan Police Authority, 2007)<sup>3</sup>. The importance placed on women's role in the family would

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<sup>3</sup> As noted by Skoczylis (2015), Prevent delivery at the local level is highly variable. Thus these conceptions of women might vary from locality to locality. However in the national policy literature, such ideas about women's peacefulness occur reliably.

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additionally emphasize their role as mothers, as will be explored more in the following section.

The 2011 review brought broad changes in the strategy, shifting risk from Muslim communities to individuals. However Prevent's attitude to women remained largely static. Although critique was voiced that the mixing of women's empowerment work with counter-terrorism was inappropriate (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010, Ev.174), and the government noted that further work would be needed to properly engage women in the strategy (HM Government, 2011c), the strategy continued to see women primarily as vectors of resilience via a purported special influence within families and communities (Home Office, 2015; Thomas, 2017). Thus when the radicalization of women began to be a concern in 2014, Prevent drew on the work previously done with women, combining it with the safeguarding rhetoric of the post-2011 policy. The idea that women were 'groomed' to travel to Syria against their own interests was a particular way that this problem was presented to families and mothers, thus linking radicalization with the discourse around safeguarding that had begun to be dominant post-2011 (Cook & Vale, 2018). This discourse framed persons who were seen as at-risk of committing terrorism offenses as manipulated subjects (Davies, 2016). Women that left for Syria were also subject to a gendered discourse in the media, increasingly being described as 'Jihadi brides' (Ibrahim, 2019). Women's radicalization – or "grooming" – in this context was therefore presented in popular and specialist media as something gendered and different to men's, falling within the purview of the 'emotional' woman (Huckerby, 2017), being something that was presented as a manipulated choice, if a choice at all. It is in this context that the Prevent Tragedies campaign was developed and launched.

### **Women, Terrorism and Prevention**

While radicalized women only came to the fore in Prevent after 2014, women's involvement in terrorism has been recognised in the wider literature for some time (Jacques & Taylor,

2009). Indeed women are recognised as being generally more deadly than men when they carry out attacks (Bloom, 2010) and as ideologically motivated as males in general (Cook & Vale, 2018), and more ideologically motivated than males in joining ISIS (Schmidt, 2020). While it is noted that sexism within terrorist groups has led many women to be relegated to support positions (Blee, 2002; Dearing, 2010), the fact that sexist attitudes that understand women as less able to commit violence are pervasive in society also allows women to slip past security more reliably (MacDonald, 1991). Further to this, as conflicts go on, the more women will become involved in violent action (Brugh, Desmarais, Simons-Rudolph, & Zottola, 2019).

Despite this, women are historically not well included in counter-terrorism as possible threats (Cook, 2020). This gap between women's involvement in terrorism and women's inclusion in counter-terrorism policy is largely identified as being caused by pervasive stereotypes. For instance, Agara (2015) argues that these stereotypes draw from a wider societal notion of 'what it means to be a woman', which 'emphasises peacefulness, mothering, caring and interdependence rather than violence' (p.117). Indeed this conception frequently slips into naturalistic arguments, with women being constructed as peaceful, and men violent, due to biological difference (Warrington & Windfeld, 2020). A common argument here is that higher testosterone levels in men leads to more violent or aggressive tendencies (Fine, 2017) or that women's ability to bear children makes them naturally more caring and empathetic (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). As a result, women are generally not expected to support terrorist groups, and those women who do join or support terrorist groups are seen as outliers. Usually these outliers are then understood as 'doubly deviant', in that they betray both the moral order and the natural order, mentally deficient, or as a victims of manipulation (Weare, 2013). Conversely, women in this framework are expected to be a pacifying influence on those around them (Eisenstein, 2007).

This understanding of women as being peaceful also effects ideas about the role of the family in radicalization. Many theories of radicalization understand radicalization as occurring via influential social networks, and by problems related to identity providing

openings for radical ideology to take hold (Elshimi, 2015; Kundnani, 2015; Sageman, 2008). The 2011 Prevent strategy posits a similar theory, and Prevent guidance understands radicalization as occurring when persons in search of identity or meaning come into contact with radical groups or persons (HM Government, 2011b, 2012). With families being commonly understood as key sites of identity construction and socialization, they are thus drawn into the prevention framework (Guru, 2012; Milardo, 1988). Within this space, the woman again appears as highly important in her role as a mother. It is commonly expected that women are the ‘natural’ carers of children, and are the persons in the family that not only provide the majority of care, education and socialization, but also are attuned to the emotional wellbeing of their children and partner (Barrett & McIntosh, 2015). Through this notion, women again become constructed as both naturally peaceful and as a key target for preventative counter-terrorism interventions, as they are best able to influence and watch over other members of the family. While there is recognition that the family in fact be a radicalizing space (Ahdash, 2019; van San, 2018), most counter-terrorism interventions target the family as a protective space, and as an institution that should be maintained as much as possible (Stanley & Guru, 2015). Schmidt (Schmidt, 2020) argues that counter-terrorism framings that rely on these stereotypes limit the types of interventions that can be carried out. If women are frequently framed as ‘duped’, or overly-emotional, then interventions, including prosecutions, are more likely to treat them as if they simply made a mistake, rather than having agency and actively choosing to get involved in terrorism. Thus women who are ideologically committed will be able to slip through the net. Additionally, care needs to be taken as to not perpetuate these stereotypes in society and thus limit the opportunities for women in wider society. Indeed as a number of feminists have argued, how society ‘imagines’ women can come to be internalized both by women and men, and place both psychic and material restrictions on their inclusion in society (Cornell, 1995).

## Strategic Communications

Strategic communications have been used frequently in counter-terrorism work, especially since the advent of the internet (Ingram & Reed, 2016). These campaigns are structured around delivering messages with the intent to create behavioural change within an audience in order to support policy objectives (Farwell, 2012). They include a target audience, calls to action, offensive and defensive messaging. Indeed strategic communications in the field of counter-terrorism has to compete with the messaging effect of terrorism itself, and the propaganda produced by terrorist groups, which when using spectacular violence tend to have a vast reach (Braithwaite, 2013).

Indeed strategic communications were recognised as being extremely important in relation to ISIS recruitment, due to the extensive and effective use of media by the group. (Shehabat & Mitew, 2018). Women were noted as occupying roles as propagandists and recruiters within the ISIS media space, reaching out to other women with targeted messaging, giving further urgency to the generation of a gendered response (Huey, Inch, & Peladeau, 2019). The potential effect of a good strategic communications campaign is outlined by Braddock and Morrison (2020) in that

When effective, counternarratives are transformative at multiple levels. They can change audience perceptions of a terrorist group, make the group's members reconsider the validity of its ideology, or even demonstrate the faults in the group's actions. They can play a significant role in pushing an individual to abandon terrorist beliefs, attitudes, or behaviour, or prevent a curious individual from engaging in the first place (p.488)

However it is noted that such campaigns can fail when trust is not built between the communicator and the audience, or messaging is clumsy or poorly targeted (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). In this sense, it is notable that the government is not always the best

communication source, and that ‘informal’ actors might be better placed to publish counter-narratives, being seen as more genuine or authentic (Lee, 2020). It is also important to note that the ‘urgency’ of counter-terrorism as well as the strictures of law puts constraints upon counter-terrorism messaging in that government agencies tend to want to maintain oversight, and governments do not want to see materials published that might be damaging to them (Davis, Noricks, & Cragin, 2009).

### **The Development, Targets and Objectives of Prevent Tragedies**

The novelty of women travelling to Syria to support primarily ISIS, and especially the spectacle of young women travelling, generated significant media interest in 2014 and 2015, and drove the police to develop a campaign in response. The media coverage of this phenomena also presented an opportunity for engagement, with the police considering that the

on-going media appetite and interest in Syria continues to provide a strong route for messaging of operational police concerns around those who may be considering travelling to the area or have returned. (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.1)

The relationship between media appetite and communications opportunity had already been noted in 2014, although no campaign had yet been finalized (Metropolitan Police Authority, 2014). Research by the police indicating that young people in particular were ‘being drawn into the ‘appeal’ of travelling to Syria’ did however mean that some action was needed (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.2).

Prior police research that had found that Muslim women were generally not well engaged by the police (A. J. Innes & Steele, 2015), and as such groundwork for a campaign targeting women had already been laid. This included a national Syria police media briefing on the 24<sup>th</sup> April 2014, and ‘advertorials in a number of national women’s magazines...and

the establishment of the national Syria women's stakeholder meeting' (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.1). These interventions had focused on urging women to report persons close to them to Prevent should they think they were being radicalized or were planning on travelling to Syria. Additionally the police were able to draw on prior Prevent campaigns targeting women, including a campaign which ended in 2013 and understood that 'women are at the heart of homes and communities, and are best placed to notice behavioural changes in their children or others' (Association of Chief Police Officers, 2012, p.1). As noted previously, prior Prevent practice involving women could also be drawn upon.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> April 2014 a request was made for the police to focus more on young women, as well as addressing concerns that the public had about calling the Anti-Terrorism Hotline. Thus the Prevent Tragedies campaign was developed both as a response to the continuing travel of persons to Syria, and the recognised need for a 'fresh and relevant' approach to communications, considering the failure of previous communications to reach young people. The campaign would build on previous Prevent work while addressing these issues, and 'creatively use input from the national female stakeholder meetings and utilise their networks and credible voice contacts to disseminate messages' (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.2).

In April 2015 Prevent Tragedies was launched with a budget of £300,000, managed as a joint project of the Metropolitan Police Service and Counter-Terrorism Policing HQ (Redmond & Viney, 2015). The project ran until at least 6<sup>th</sup> June 2017, when the final post was made on the [www.preventtragedies.co.uk](http://www.preventtragedies.co.uk) website (Cole, 2017). After this point, the website, which was the central hub for Prevent Tragedies messaging, began to redirect to <https://www.ltai.info>, a similar Prevent project directed more broadly at the general public. As of 20 March 2020, the website now shows a HTTP error 404.

Reflecting concern around women travelling to Syria, the primary target audience of the campaign were

Women who are close to young women who are at risk of radicalisation and/or travelling to Syria e.g. mothers, aunts, sisters, friends or those who may be able to identify behavioural change. (Redmond & Viney, 2015 pp.3-4)

Alongside this, the project had a secondary target audience of those young Muslim women and men who might be considering travelling to Syria to fight or support those who are fighting (Redmond & Viney, 2015).

The objectives of the campaign were:

- To explore avenues that will deter travel to Syria and resonate with the target audience;
- Using anonymised examples we will seek to counter the narrative and help portray the reality of the situation in Syria;
- With the help of the national female stakeholder group, identify credible voices to help disseminate messages that will resonate with young people and their families;
- To empower young people by providing the facts about the situation in Syria in an attempt to help them make informed decisions and deter travel; and
- To find credible voices and case studies that will resonate with young people and their families. (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.3)

These were backed up with operational objectives which sought to build on previous Prevent work so that families could ‘take action if they are worried about the behaviour of young women who are close to them’ (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.3), as well as reassuring the public that the police were continuing to work to counter the terrorism threat. Prevent Tragedies would also work to reinforce the fact that Prevent would become a statutory duty under the CTSA (Redmond & Viney, 2015). Thus the campaign tied broadly into the Prevent policy of 2011, which sought to ‘[r]espond to the ideological challenge of terrorism’ and ‘[p]revent people from being drawn into terrorism’ (HM Government, 2011a, pp.59-60), and was targeted primarily at the British Muslim population.

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## Delivery and Content

The Prevent Tragedies campaign had a number of outputs, most prominently the website [www.preventtragedies.co.uk](http://www.preventtragedies.co.uk), which hosted information and advice on radicalization, travel warnings about Syria, resources for mothers and women to draw on in having conversations about radicalization, and posts related to communicating the Prevent Tragedies objectives (Prevent Tragedies, 2020b). Other outputs included radio adverts, online videos, leaflets, and a partnership with You Can Now to award students who designed the best campaign that would deter young women from travelling to Syria, or encourage mothers to have conversations with their daughters on the issue (Prevent Tragedies, 2016a; Redmond & Viney, 2015). Social media pages were also set up for the campaign, including a twitter profile @PreventUK which used the hashtags #PreventTragedies and #LeftBehind to promote the campaign across partner feeds. A Facebook page mirroring those tweets was also set up at [www.facebook.com/PreventTragediesUK](http://www.facebook.com/PreventTragediesUK). Alongside this, the campaign set up an Instagram account with the username @Preventtragedies and an Pintrest account with the username @preventtragedie. While the Twitter account is now locked, the other social media accounts still exist, although historic data for their engagement is not available<sup>4</sup>. The campaign also worked to reach out to schools and news agencies. Sixteen articles are returned by LexisNexis when searching for preventtragedies.co.uk, with the campaign inserting it's core message into comments given to newspapers on terrorism related subjects. A Google search for "preventtragedies.co.uk" returns 189 pages that have linked to the website, including; schools, universities and colleges; local police forces; local NHS and healthcare providers; county councils; and smaller local news agencies not picked up by LexisNexis.

Little information is available on the reach of the web campaign now that the website is offline. Mark Rowley, then assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, claimed in 2016 that 300 people were visiting the site per day (Evans, 2016). However, this figure cannot be substantiated independently and does not tell us whether these visits were unique or repeat

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<sup>4</sup> As of July 2020 these accounts are dormant and have 147 follows between them. Since going dormant many initial followers would likely have un-followed, and so this number is not a good indicator of reach.

visits. There are no figures about how the campaign was received across all years of operation. However, the associated YouTube channel which hosted all of the Prevent Tragedies video content produced 16 videos which were viewed 91,614 times in total (Prevent Tragedies, 2020a). While the two platforms are nominally independent, these figures do indicate that the figure of 300 visits per day is not something which should be taken as an indicator for visits across the entirety of the campaign.

While the content delivered by Prevent Tragedies was diverse, overarching messaging was built in so that the objectives of the project would be met by each output. The brief provided at project launch sought to deliver the message that:

The situation in Syria is complex and dangerous and there are many terrorist and extremist groups involved in the conflict. The creation of the so-called Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria, and the Islamist extremism and export of terror on which it is based, is a direct threat to UK security.

Terrorists prey on vulnerable people and it is our joint responsibility to protect them. If you are concerned about a loved one the police can help. We can work together to help protect the young people in our communities. There is support available to you and to them. Take action before things go too far. (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.5)

Each output would seek to deliver this overarching message, as well as more specific points. Women and mothers who viewed Prevent Tragedies documentation would be expected to come away aware of the risk of radicalization faced by young women, and should be confident that if they had a concern about radicalization then ‘it is better that I seek help from the police as soon as possible...[t]his is the best way that I can protect them’ (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.4). Recipients should also come away with the understanding that if they did not call the police, then ‘their [daughter’s/niece’s/sister’s/friend’s] fate could be much worse in Syria’ (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.4). Supporting this would be content with a tone

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of voice that was '[e]mpathetic, authoritative and informative' (Redmond & Viney, 2015, p.6).

### **Overarching Discourses: Mothers & Daughters**

Much of Prevent Tragedies included calls to action and attempts to get targets to internalize information. With mothers as a key target demographic, Prevent Tragedies tries to do this by using language which leverages a presumed care relationship between mothers and daughters. It assumes that there is a uniquely close bond between mother and daughter that can be leveraged for counter terrorism work, and that mothers would, by wanting what is best for their children, be the best mediator between Prevent and young girls. This assumption is that mothers are 'often the ones in a family who are most likely to spot signs and notice changes in their children's behaviour' (Prevent Tragedies, 2015, p.3) because 'the strong bond between a mother and daughter can have a powerful influence on a young woman. [The mother] can talk to [her] daughter about her feelings' (Prevent Tragedies, 2015b, p.2). This idea draws on assumptions about females, in that the bond is presumed to exist as part of women's nurturing and mothering capability (Hooper, 2017). Indeed mothers are clearly targeted in Prevent Tragedies as vectors for the delivery of messaging based on this assumption, being able to access a wide array of persons and utilize their emotional connection to convince (Prevent Tragedies, 2015a). These core messages used a number of strategic communications techniques to increase trust and compliance. This included direct counter-messages to ISIS propaganda, attempting to undermine the romance of joining the group by arguing that those who joined would lose the rights they had as women in the U.K., and the use of Syrian mothers to increase the authenticity of messages, as well as increasing trust (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Braddock & Morrison, 2020).

Naturally, it would be expected that telling mothers that their daughters might become radicalized would generate some anxiety. Prevent Tragedies thus includes messaging to advise those mothers. Part of the advice given to mothers who might subsequently be worried

about their daughters becoming radicalized included increasing the kind of emotional and care work that they are expected to do within the families, again drawing on stereotypical ideas about the mother's unique care role in the family (Barrett & McIntosh, 2015). A leaflet aimed at mothers stated that they should 'keep their children close – to constantly remind them that they are loved, that they are part of a strong family network and that they can talk to you about anything they are worried about' (Prevent Tragedies, 2015a, p.3). Additional advice in this leaflet included taking more interest in the online activities of children, and talking to children about issues of concern to them (Prevent Tragedies, 2015a, p.3). These leaflets were printed and placed in key points in Muslim communities around the U.K., as well as appearing throughout the month of March 2015 in various publications with a high Asian or Muslim readership. Leaflets and adverts were printed in multiple languages (Metropolitan Police Authority, 2015).

A 30 second radio campaign developed for Prevent Tragedies carried a similar message:

*A compassionate message delivered by a warm and authoritative British Asian female voice.*

[Voiceover]: This is a message from the Prevent Tragedies Campaign, in partnership with UK Police and partners.

It's not just young men who are travelling to Syria.

Several young women are now known to have left home for the conflict, leaving their families devastated and afraid.

We know that the strong bond between a mother and daughter can have a powerful influence on a young woman.

You can talk to your daughter about her feelings.

You could see changes in behaviour, or signs she may be about to travel, to a conflict that millions are desperate to escape.

You can reach specially trained people for help and advice by calling 101. (Prevent Tragedies, 2015b)

This radio message aimed at Asian women in general, and Asian Women aged 45+, was carried on Sunrise Radio London and North East, Sabras Sound, Asian Sound and Koh-i-Noor Radio. Sabras Sound carrying 120 spots, and the rest carrying 60 spots per station, was calculated to give a gross rating point of 175.9 generally and 183.1 for Asian women aged 45+ (Metropolitan Police Authority, 2015). The radio campaign, like the leaflet campaign, pushed the idea that daughters might be, unbeknownst to others in the family, in grave danger. According to the message, it was their mothers who had the power to protect them above anyone else by virtue of a ‘strong bond’, presented as something presumed and therefore almost as if naturally occurring. That the family was at risk as well as the daughter was also carried in this message. It is this dual message of risk – to the individual and to the wider family – that primarily underpinned the attempts to convince mothers to comply with Prevent.

A series of open letters from Syrian mothers hosted on the Prevent Tragedies website further urged mothers to talk with their daughters so that they would not travel to Syria (Prevent Tragedies, 2016d). The letters not only urged mothers to talk with their daughters and discourage them from travel; they also provided a stark vision of what would happen if they failed to do this. One letter warns, ‘don’t take the risk that you might wake up one day and find your daughter has fled to Syria. It could be the last time you ever see her, talk to her or see her face.’ (Prevent Tragedies, 2016d). Other letters describe how ISIS has caused the deaths of innocents, including women and children, and that women even travelling to Syria could ‘face arrest, torture, or even death’ (Prevent Tragedies, 2016d). Other communications reiterated this threat, and further expanded it to the family as a whole - much of the literature talks about the ‘devastation’ a family would face if a family member chose to travel to Syria, resulting in ‘heartbreak’ and the possibility of the community around them rejecting them, being ever referred to as ‘the terrorists up the road’ (Prevent Tragedies, 2016b, 00:03:30-00:03:33). One scene includes how an 18 month old child is imagined as being unable to

understand that his older brother had left to Syria and died, demonstrating how travelling to Syria could negatively affect even those most innocent of wrongdoing (Prevent Tragedies, 2016b).

Alongside the threat of death, women's rights are framed as something under threat, and given as a reason for complying with Prevent. As with the conceptualization of the mother which was drawn from prior Prevent documentation, the idea that terrorism threatens women's rights also appears to be drawn from contemporary counter-terrorism discourses in the UK, being an idea that appears in Prevent, and most prominently in the Counter Extremism Strategy (HM Government, 2015). Those that travel to Syria are warned that ISIS are 'preventing people from educating themselves, making them illiterate. My sister told me of a family where all the women – including a four year old girl – were forced to wear full coverings' (Prevent Tragedies, 2016d). Then-Senior National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism Policing Helen Ball contrasts the life on offer in Syria to that which women can achieve in the UK, saying to potential travellers

What are you going to do with the rest of your life there? What are the opportunities open to you in Syria? Who are you going to be in life? --- these opportunities are so much smaller and circumscribed in Syria than if you remained here in the UK. (Prevent Tragedies, N.D., p.3)

She further opines on how poor an environment Syria would be for a woman to raise a child in (Prevent Tragedies, N.D.). Likewise, the 2016 International Women's Day pledge by Counter Terrorism Police, fronted by Prevent Tragedies, further framed terrorism as something which results in the 'degrading treatment of women' (Prevent Tragedies, 2016c, 00:00:24-00:00:28) and declared that '[w]omen should not be held in forced or bogus marriage, subjected to rape, slavery, denied education, or encouraged to put them or their children in danger' (Prevent Tragedies, 2016c, 00:00:34-00:00:48). As part of this pledge, Counter Terrorism Police promised to protect women's rights and support their empowerment

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(Prevent Tragedies, 2016c), giving a positive spin to the campaign and reflecting discourses about the relationship between counter-terrorism and women's rights that have been part of Prevent since the policy began.

### **Radicalization: Spotting the Signs**

For those women convinced by the campaign, it also offered advice on how to spot the signs of vulnerability or radicalization, giving mothers the information they would need to successfully act on concerns. It also offered theories as to why radicalization might occur. The definitions of radicalization and extremism provided by Prevent Tragedies remain largely the same as that provided in the Prevent policy, maintaining consistent national messaging (Prevent Tragedies, N.D.a). The 'signs' of radicalization to look out for, and factors that might be a source of vulnerability, however diverge from what is presented in the national policy literature, specifically the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) and Prevent policy. For instance, factors of vulnerability presented include identity crisis where 'the pupil is distanced from their cultural / religious heritage' (Prevent Tragedies, N.D.a, p.1); a personal crisis including family tensions and questions about faith; and personal circumstances including 'migration; local community tensions; and events affecting the pupil's country or region of origin' (Prevent Tragedies, N.D.a, p.1). The signs of radicalization include support for ISIS and/or a desire to travel to conflict zones in the Middle East and Somalia and Libya (Prevent Tragedies, N.D.a). These factors are clearly concerned with a person of minority background, underlining that the campaign was concerned only with Islamic extremism. Factors present in the VAF are much more general and do not include religion-specific or culture-specific markers of concern (HM Government, 2012).

While the above factors can be considered to be 'racialised' (Wolfe, 2016), they are not explicitly gendered. However, advice offered specifically to mothers within targeted leaflets did include some signs that might indicate that a young woman or girl was at risk of radicalization or travelling to Syria. In particular, mothers were warned to look out for

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females becoming ‘interested in politics or foreign policy when she has not shown an interest before’. Other factors included asking for identification documents, saving money, and getting new clothes or new friends (Prevent Tragedies, 2015a, p.3). While the concept of ‘risk’ is something that is present throughout Prevent, the framing of women’s political interest here as a possible risk factor could reinforce political disadvantage. Considering that young men are generally more likely to be encouraged to be involved in politics from a young age, and young women are less likely to do so (Kenny, 2015), framing political interest as something possibly negative for women risks reproducing social barriers to women’s involvement in political life should this risk be taken to be general.

Getting interested in politics as a risk factor of radicalization also gels with the theories as to why young women might be attracted to fight in Syria. In Prevent Tragedies these theories are more heavily gendered than those presented in national policy literature. In a leaflet aimed at mothers, the idea that young women might be attracted to ‘the ‘glamour’ of marrying a fighter’ is presented (Prevent Tragedies, 2015a, p.2). This is built upon further by Helen Ball, who states that marrying a fighter might fulfil a sense of purpose that a young woman has (Prevent Tragedies, N.D.b). Additionally, she presents the idea that young women might be pushing back against parental control. Said in the context of a campaign targeted at Muslims and Asian women, it can be presumed that this ‘parental control’ referred to is similar to the restrictive home environments that young Muslim women are presumed to suffer under in wider Prevent literature (Hirschfield, Christmann, Wilcox, Rogerson, & Sharratt, 2012; HM Government, 2011c). She however rejects the idea that discrimination in the UK might be a factor in women’s decision to leave, arguing that the UK provides ‘wonderful opportunities for young women’ (Prevent Tragedies, N.D.b, p.2).

### **Promoting Prevent: What to do and how to do it**

Mothers who think that their daughters might be becoming radicalized are encouraged to call 101 or talk to the police (Prevent Tragedies, 2015d, 2015b). They would then be referred to

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Prevent. By 2015, the debate around Prevent being a ‘toxic brand’ was ongoing, with former senior police officers claiming that Prevent was seen as a tool for spying on Muslim communities (Halliday & Dodd, 2015). As previously mentioned, police studies had confirmed that Muslim women were least likely to engage with the police (M. Innes, Innes, & Roberts, 2011). To combat this and encourage women to contact 101 or the police, Prevent Tragedies would present Prevent as something that was a continuation of other police work, and would link it to safeguarding, mirroring wider Prevent discourse from the government. This would de-link it from the toxic brand debate, and instead link it to other policing matters which generally had more support. It argued that ‘[t]he Prevent programme is based on the successful work British police carried out with community groups and families to reduce gun and gang crime in our big cities’ (Prevent Tragedies, 2015c, p.3) and equated talking to the police about radicalization to talking to the police about drugs, child abuse and crime (Prevent Tragedies, 2015c). Prevent would also be framed as something caring, with referrals being presented as ‘good’ acts (Redmond & Viney, 2015), likely to be successful and supported by the community at large (Prevent Tragedies, 2015c). Both those being referred and those referring would be supported (Prevent Tragedies, 2015c), and interventions would ultimately be about protecting individuals, and safeguarding them from harm (Prevent Tragedies, 2015c).

For those women that would worry about the criminalization of their children by Prevent, the campaign offers a number of reassurances. In the first instance, it reiterates that criminalization is better than death (Redmond & Viney, 2015). Beyond this, though, it offers a hope that even those who have left might not be criminalised; hence, those who are still in the United Kingdom have a better chance of avoiding prosecution. In an interview hosted on the website, Helen Ball outlines that in the case of those young women who had already travelled to, and returned from, Syria:

The first thing we would need to do is find out whether they are people who are deeply radicalised, have been trained as dangerous terrorists or whether they are people who

have made a mistake and are coming back and want to leave that completely behind them (Prevent Tragedies, N.D., p.3)

While those women would be expected to work with the police, the narrative leaves open a claim of innocence on a part of women, allowing them to claim that they were not radicalized, but rather ‘groomed’ persons who were manipulated and thus had little responsibility for their decision. Indeed ‘if all that they have done is made a mistake and they want to put that right, then they will be given the opportunity to carry on with their lives here’ (Prevent Tragedies, N.D., p.3). While there is a possibility that those referred would face investigations and prosecution (Prevent Tragedies, 2015c), mothers were to consider this in relation to the alternative possibility of their child’s death should they not report them, as outlined previously. The narrative of the campaign, while acknowledging this, nonetheless played down criminalization and played up the ‘tragedy’ aspect of inaction, stating that ‘[t]his is not about criminalising people it is about preventing tragedies.’ (Prevent Tragedies, 2015c, p.1) Thus mothers are offered a choice within the Prevent Tragedies campaign; watch your daughters and report them if you think they are vulnerable, or risk their death in Syria and the destruction of your family.

### **Discussion: Prevent Tragedies, Prevent and Women**

As outlined at the start of the article, the concentration on women in Prevent Tragedies is not new. It draws upon the national Prevent policy literature in relation to women which tends to rely upon stereotypical ideas about pacific femininity and the unique ability of women to nurture and care for others. The Prevent policies of 2006, 2009, 2011 see women largely as nurturing subjects and are presented as being at the ‘heart of the community’ and at the ‘heart of the family’, putting them in an advantageous position to both monitor those close to them for signs of radicalization and to affect change within their communities and families. Indeed the narratives presented as part of Prevent Tragedies’ communications draws on Prevent

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policy broadly, most clearly in that it draws the concepts of the woman at the heart of the family and pacific motherhood into its communications. The role of the mother in Prevent here appears to draw heavily on theories that see women as different to men primarily through their biological difference and practice of mothering, thus ‘naturalizing’ these assumptions. The latter in particular provides a framework for understanding the mother’s role in counter-terrorism, as motherhood is understood to be caring, nurturing and creative. Through this, motherhood also creates relational “selfhoods”, defining woman in relation to others, generating superior empathy skills in opposition to men’s universal selfhood, which concentrates solely on the development of the individual (Spelman, 1988). Thus mothers and daughters are, as females, assumed in this framework to have a relationship based on mutuality, rather than individuality. Therefore females create ‘bonds’ between each other which differ to those created between men, as they are based on a self which is inhabited partially by the Other. Daughters within this framework are assumed to be incorporated as females by their looking to their mother as a role model, and thus assuming the modality of care and relational selfhood into themselves through mutual identification (Ferguson, 1989). Through this, we can come to talk about women and daughters having a ‘unique bond’, which can be taken advantage of by counter-terrorism communications. Indeed it is this bond that also offers a solution to the problem of female radicalization. Mothers are encouraged to use their abilities as nurturers and carers to protect their daughters and to ‘keep [your] children close – to constantly remind them that they are loved, that they are part of a strong family network and that they can talk to you about anything they are worried about’ (Prevent Tragedies, 2015a, p.3).

These models, drawing on traditional ideas of femininity, can be criticised for their role in perpetuating women’s disadvantage within the family system. The concentration on mothers here, for instance, does not take into account how housework and care work within the context of the family might be detrimental to women. Feminists of the second wave such as Christine Delphy have long argued that the expectations placed on women via marriage, motherhood and the family contribute to patriarchal social structures which hamper women.

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Delphy, for instance, argues that the expectation that women look after home, husband and children is laborious and leaves little time for women's education or advancement in the workplace and therefore leaves them lacking in comparison to men, who do not experience the same pressures (Delphy, 2016). That women are generally expected to do this further creates a 'motherhood penalty' for those women who do work and have children, as firms expect them to contribute less time to work and more time to family (Fine, 2011). Those women who do not work, and chose to stay at home to look after children, will find themselves underqualified and underexperienced for when they might wish to look for work, pushing them towards dependence on their partner's wage and away from financial independence (Foster, 2016). That financial independence is especially important should a woman want to leave a partner; all the more so if that partner is abusive (Kim & Gray, 2008) and as such, lacking it means that women face pressure to stay in dependent relationships. A counter-terrorism programme that effectively warns women that the punishment for not creating a loving family environment is the possibility that their child could travel to Syria and die should be seen within this context as something which creates additional pressure upon women to be effective organizers and custodians of the home. This pressure is especially evident in Muslim households. In 2015 the Muslim Council found that 18% of Muslim women aged 18-74 were 'looking after home or family', compared to 6% of the U.K. population (Sundas, 2015). This was found to be a significant factor in the social and economic engagement of Muslim women, with Bangladeshi and Pakistani<sup>5</sup> women earning less than women from all other ethnic minority groups and with only 38% of women from these ethnic groups in work (Griffith & Malik, 2018). We should also question more generally here why there is not a communications programme that targets men in the same way, and asks them to be better fathers and take more responsibility in the household; indeed across the Prevent literature, communications that target the family tend to either target women as mothers, or the family as a whole, which we tend to assume is the realm of women anyway

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<sup>5</sup> In 2016 '38 per cent of Muslims are Pakistani; 15 per cent are Bangladeshi; 14 per cent other Asian; 10 per cent Black; 6.6 per cent Arab; 2.9 per cent white British; 4.8 per cent other white' (Griffith & Malik, 2018, p.3)

(Rashid, 2013). ‘Counter-terrorism-as-care’ is here highly weighted upon women, and more so upon some of the most disadvantaged women in the U.K.

Prevent Tragedies innovates however in its recognition that women might be radicalized. Indeed it is at this point in 2014 and 2015 that radicalized women begin to enter into wider counter-terrorism discourse and practice. This would not be the first time radicalized women would be mentioned in relation to Prevent policy (Metropolitan Police Authority, 2007), but certainly before this women were very much side-lined in this context. Indeed it was the growing amount of women travelling to Syria and Iraq from the U.K. which would challenge the lack of attention to radicalized women (van Ginkel et al., 2016). Prevent Tragedies was created in reaction to this realization. However this recognition nonetheless does not stray far from traditional gendered ideas of women’s agency and action. In this sense, women are not included at all as *radicalizers*. Rather they are presented largely as victims of manipulation, romance and emotional thinking.

It is likely the reactionary nature of counter-terrorism policy that is the reason for this, with women not commonly being thought of as terrorist agents and policy only reacting to developments on the ground (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). Thus Prevent Tragedies largely mirrors the media and social portrayals of the women travellers to Syria and Iraq being brainwashed, manipulated, groomed, or otherwise making the decision to travel without agency. Indeed, it seems to actively rely on this conception in order to secure the engagement of the target audience, who might be otherwise inclined to report people to the police if they thought they were engaged in developing political beliefs of their own volition. Framing reporting to the police as an act of care, rather than an act of betrayal, would also soften the blow of reporting a family member to the police. One cannot ‘snitch’ or be accused of spying as easily if it is done to safeguarding agencies rather than the police, even if in reality it will end up with the police (Firman, 2019). The guidance and discourse around preventing this travel then largely fell into the existing policy rhetoric around safeguarding, in that these women primarily needed to be *protected* from adverse external influences. By placing radicalized women primarily into this narrative also places them within frameworks which

reinforce traditional ideas about femininity: women are emotional, easily led, romantic, and are seeking out powerful men for partnership (Cornell, 1995; Fine, 2017). Women are then not conceptualised as agents in any way, and instead function within the regulatory ideal of the passive woman (Butler, 2011).

This regulatory idea can be thought of as further reinforced by the fact that if women who travelled *do* reject the notion that they were manipulated, they then will lose the protection afforded by the assumption that they just ‘made a mistake’ as outlined by Helen Ball (Prevent Tragedies, N.D.b). While this gives women who travelled to Islamic State territory, theoretically, some leeway to avoid prosecution, they must first accept the fact that they were somehow blind to the reality of ISIS. While this functions to rob ISIS’s ideology of support, it does so at the cost both of these women having to deny any political grievance that might have contributed to their leaving for Syria, thus robbing us of the opportunity to learn about why these women made the choices they did. From this logic we can see the spectacle Shamima Begum and other ISIS-affiliated women in Kurdish captivity having to be paraded across the media pretending that they were simply groomed and totally unaware of the reality of ISIS (Loyd, 2019). That Begum lost her citizenship anyway despite using the defence that the government itself laid down as possible perhaps also underscores the highly political nature of these narratives, in that framing women as naïve actors is used only to delegitimize ISIS ideology, and when women might want to use it in their defence, it is found to be a narrative that is not really *for* them, but just *about* them. Thus the argument returns to those made at the start of Prevent, that women are used by the government in their counter-terrorism policy, but do not really figure into policy beyond their utility as counter-terrorist agents (Rehman, 2014).

This interplay between regulatory ideal and ideological denial is also found in the rejection of the idea that Prevent might be a damaging policy. As mentioned previously, Prevent has weathered a significant amount of criticism. In 2006 and 2009, the policy implied that terrorists might have political concerns, or grievances that drive them to align against the state (HM Government, 2006, 2009). By 2011, this idea was wholeheartedly rejected, setting

up an absolute dichotomy of British values and extremism in 2015. Prevent Tragedies largely aligns itself with this idea. Prevent Tragedies in particular does this through denying that discrimination in the UK might be causal in radicalization, instead insisting that women have the best life chances here in the UK. That Muslim women in the U.K. are at a high risk of hate crime victimization is not given any acknowledgement here (Tell MAMA, 2017). Nor is the aforementioned social and economic disadvantage that many Muslim women suffer under – a problem compounded by wider racism and islamophobia in society, and one of which Muslim women are politically aware of and mobilize against (Lewicki & O’Toole, 2017). These arguments interlock with those made about radicalized women – that they do not understand politics well enough to make informed decisions. Whereas in relation to radicalized women the regulatory ideal could be used in favour of radicalized women to the detriment of ISIS support, in this case women become trapped by it. Accepting that women were too naïve to understand ISIS when they travelled to Syria also means that the naïve subject could be applied to cases of women opposing Prevent: they must be naïve to oppose it. Thus through Prevent Tragedies we lose the ability to consider women as political subjects, and lose understanding of what might cause women to be radicalized, or indeed, become radicalizers themselves.

## Conclusion

Prevent Tragedies, while being innovative in that it attempts to draw women into the preventative counter-terrorism apparatus of the U.K., and in that it considers women as possible subjects of radicalization, nonetheless suffers from a number of flaws. It largely considers women within the frameworks of pacific femininity and motherhood, and therefore finds itself unable to consider women either as persons who might have rationally chosen to leave for Syria in pursuit of political aims; and in that it fails to consider women as possible radicalizers. It also draws heavily on the assumption that mothers are best placed to manage family and community relationships. Therefore, we find ourselves in a situation where we

cannot properly learn about the true reasons for women travelling to Syria, and the conditions of their radicalization. We also find ourselves in a situation where undue pressure is placed on women to manage the family, arguably hampering their social advancement.

This is however not the only frame through which Prevent Tragedies can be analysed. While this campaign is reactive, like much of counter-terrorism, it is a step forward towards recognising the reality of female involvement in terrorism and extremism. Both terrorism and extremism are highly political. While the ‘safeguarding’ discourse might be politically useful in that it draws legitimacy away from terrorist and extremist groups, and softens the blow of reporting upon family members, dependants, co-workers and friends, it does rob us of a political understanding of these phenomena. Women especially suffer from this depoliticization, as it draws upon historical ideas about female naivety. When developing – and when analysing – these campaigns, we should be fully aware of them as political, and come to understand them within historical political frameworks. If we do not, we lose a whole dimension of not only analysis, but eventually political consciousness. For who exactly can say that their political beliefs were not made in a social environment?

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