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# Why undertake research on Shamima Begum?

## Because women's stories matter

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Here I am an Early Career Researcher. I am not from the United Kingdom, and I should confess that up until two years ago, I had never even heard of the name 'Shamima Begum'. So why focus my entire PhD research on her?

Before starting my doctoral degree, I realised that the focus on agency within the literature on women's pathways into crime was rather recent. Feminist strands of criminology had highlighted the importance of victimization as a potential factor for crime a few decades ago (Fleetwood, 2014). Nevertheless, feminist scholars later stated that when used as a sole factor, victimization may potentially overshadow agency (Allen, 1987). Do those women not have the same agentic choice as their male counterparts? When it comes to terrorism specifically, women who perpetrate acts of terror will often be portrayed as having mostly personal reasons for joining terror groups: "he killed my son, husband, father, so I want revenge". Think of women you have heard or read about who have committed acts of terror. How are they portrayed by the media? Is agency even brought up? Or is it masked behind their personal past and/or emotional motivations?

I am aware of the influence and the impact the media may possess (Marthoz, 2017). I was living in Paris when the ISIS terrorist attacks struck in January and November 2015. I remember the fear on people's faces when they took the subway for at least a month following the Bataclan attacks. And I distinctly recall, above all, the media framing of those events. I remember the terror I felt when watching the news and the distressing newspaper headlines. I refused to get out of my house for several days. This, I was sure, did not help the moral panic I could feel in Paris, and in France. And I believe that Shamima's story, somehow, may not fall so far off when it comes to the public reacting to what they see in the media.

Let us focus on Shamima. The bright, 15-year-old British Muslim girl left the UK to join the Islamic State in Syria in early 2015. It was a shock for the entire British population; and it was a shock for me to hear about her story years later. She is younger than me (she is currently 24 years old), and since she joined ISIS, she has been married to someone almost twice her age, then had three children, all of whom are now deceased. She has survived the so-called Caliphate, was found by a journalist of *The Times* in 2019 and subsequently started to publicly plea to go home. She did not make it back to the UK. Her citizenship was stripped by the British government. This decision was upheld before the UK Supreme Court in 2021. Today, she remains in a refugee camp in Syria, still stateless.

After having absorbed every available piece of information on her, I became curious about the way the media have been framing Shamima for the past eight and a half years. I did not want

to find out whether Shamima was in fact a terrorist, what she had done during her time in ISIS, or if she was 'just' a victim of grooming, as her lawyers argued numerous times.

Think about it for a second. Overnight, Shamima went from being portrayed as a child who probably had been tricked into joining ISIS, to a national hate figure. On numerous occasions, the media shared what the then-Home Secretary Sajid Javid had claimed after he decided to remove her citizenship: "no one would let Shamima Begum return if they knew what I know". Time and time again, Shamima appeared unrepentant and remorseless in the press, showed no empathy, was characterized as 'entitled' for asking the UK to "bring her home", and expressed no emotion or guilt when interrogated about the 2017 Manchester attacks committed by ISIS. At least according to the media, who often asked their readers whether they thought Shamima was "deserving of forgiveness".

Yet, to me, it was evident from the start that her story is far more complex. Shamima herself mentioned at some point that she became a 'poster girl', and she may not be entirely wrong. She represents everything the UK did (and still do) not wish to allow back in their country. Perhaps the media had a part to play in the way she was treated by the public and by the courts. In all of this, still in the press, her agency is often overlooked, or rather simplified. She is now storied as a woman who joined ISIS and for this, deserves to remain stateless in a camp for the rest of her life. Why she decided to join – if she decided at all, and to what extent – is barely talked about.

This brings additional questions to light. Why was Shamima's story so publicised, instead of someone else's? What does this say about Western civilization? Is this not yet another demonstration of patriarchy and Islamophobia, at least to a certain extent? Did her story blow up because she is a woman, and men committing crime is seen the norm and women the exception, unequivocally leading to the portrayal of women who offend as abnormal, pathological human beings? Is it because Shamima is not a white woman, because she comes from a Muslim family, because her parents are not born in the UK, even though she was? The government justified the decision of removing Shamima's citizenship by stating that she is far from being the only one to have been made stateless after having joined ISIS, but few were treated by the media the way she was. Shamima's citizenship was removed after the media narrative shifted when Shamima was found back in 2019, after the so-called 'Caliphate' had fallen.

This is partly why I decided to conduct my thesis on the mediatic discourses around Shamima, but other reasons have emerged since I started my PhD. I have also been a Tutor at the University of Glasgow for more than a year now. I teach Sociology and Criminology and my students are mostly women. Those young women are just learning that Criminological research, up until recently, did not focus on women, but on men. Theories were built around men, then were automatically 'deemed applicable' to women (Gelsthorpe, 2003). When they learn this, their faces speak for themselves. Undergraduate students who chose to study Sociology tend, for the majority, to be feminists. Yes, I tell them, this was the truth up until a few decades ago. And then what happened? Feminist criminology. Did it solve everything? Not yet.

I am a woman myself and this topic moves me from a personal standpoint. I would like the Feminist criminology literature on women's pathways into crime to keep evolving like it has in

the past few decades. I would like to be able to teach my students that things have changed, that nowadays women are being heard, and not for debatable reasons. I would like to tell them that now, women's studies focus on *women*, and are not just studies solely based around men, then applied to women. That the narratives around women who offend are not sensationalized, that all humans committing crimes are portrayed similarly. I wish to never see what Shamima went through happen to someone else ever again, but I remain (to be diplomatic) cautiously optimistic. For my PhD, I am conducting a media analysis on the frames constructing Shamima's story because I believe women's stories should be learned, dissected, and shared. Those women are more than just boxes, stereotypes, caricatures, or frames. Their stories are complex, and Shamima's is no exception. *But they matter, and they should be heard.* Whatever you may think of her, you must think about what her story being framed in such ways represents for the UK, for women who offend, and for women in general. This is not a men's world, and we should stop acting like it.

## References

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