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## **OFSTED Chief's Crusade against Primary Girls Wearing Hijab is a Trojan Horse to De-Islamicise Muslim Youth**

Religious extremists are using schools, *“to actively pervert the purpose of education... Under the pretext of religious belief, they use education institutions, legal and illegal, to narrow young people's horizons, to isolate and segregate, and in the worst cases to indoctrinate impressionable minds with extremist ideology... Freedom of belief in the private sphere is paramount, but in our schools it is our responsibility to tackle those who actively undermine fundamental British values or equalities law.”*

These were the words of Amanda Spielman, head of OFSTED (the UK government body that inspects and regulates schools in Britain) that she delivered in a speech at a Church of England Education Conference on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February that was attended by various faith school leaders. You may ask... was it in reference to 'Religious Extremists' indoctrinating children with terrorist ideology in schools, OR advocating ideas that sow hatred and division between communities, OR perhaps spreading thoughts which cause Muslims to become hermits in society?

NO! It was in relation to Muslim parents who voiced their strong support of the right of their daughters to wear the hijab in their primary school.

Spielman's accusations came on the same day where she publicly expressed her backing of the headteacher of St. Stephen's Primary School in Newham, East London, who tried to ban the hijab for girls under the age of eight in this predominantly Muslim state school. The decision of the headteacher was subsequently overturned by the school's governors and due to heavy opposition from parents and community leaders.

In her speech at the conference, she also called for school leaders to use *“muscular liberalism”* when setting policies and in defending the decisions they make, rather than fearing causing offence, and that, *“schools must not, in their entirely correct goal of promoting tolerance, shy away from challenging fundamentalist practice where it appears in their schools or communities.”* The OFSTED Chief also stated that, *“School leaders must have the right to set school uniform policies in a way that they see fit, in order to promote cohesion”* and that *they “must not allow pressure from certain elements of school communities to dictate school policy”*, clearly referring to those Muslim parents who stood against the hijab ban in their daughter's school.

Last November, Spielman also ordered her school inspectors in England to interrogate Muslim primary school girls wearing the hijab as to why they adopt the dress, arguing that the move was because, *“creating an environment where primary school children are expected to wear the hijab could be interpreted as sexualisation of young girls.”* Her announcement was met by protest from more than 1000 academics, teachers and faith leaders who accused OFSTED of a *“kneejerk, discriminatory and institutionally racist response”*. And this January, according to The Guardian, a meeting between OFSTED and representatives from faith schools discussed a new policy that would penalise schools who were found to have been swayed by parents over uniform regulations. The school would be downgraded and have their leadership and managers graded as inadequate.

In response to OFSTED's relentless crusade against various Islamic beliefs and practices, including Muslim primary girls wearing the hijab, the following points need to be made:

1. At a time when the UK is facing a huge educational crisis in which teachers are haemorrhaging the profession, where there is a deterioration of discipline in classrooms, and where almost half of pupils in England leave primary school unable to read and write properly; AND at a time where epidemic levels of bullying, mental illness, low self-esteem, knife-crime, sexting and an environment of hyper-sexualisation is affecting the lives of millions of youth in this country... it is extremely telling that the head of OFSTED should see it fit to focus her time and attention, and that of her inspectors on a small proportion of children at primary school who wear a headscarf... especially considering that the school in Newham that sought to implement the hijab ban, that she supported, was rated as OUTSTANDING by OFSTED and is England's top performing school. Clearly, the wearing of the hijab did not 'narrow the minds and horizons' of these young pupils or affect their learning capacity in any way at all. Her focus therefore on making this NON-ISSUE an issue while the education system in the UK is falling apart at its seams, is a reflection of the fact that the British government's relentless and intensive agenda to "DE-ISLAMICISE" Muslim children and youth, using all arms of the state, is clearly a priority in its eyes. It is the same "De-Islamicisation" agenda that the flawed counterextremism PREVENT policies being implemented in schools is based upon where children are being flagged up as potential terrorists for their Islamic beliefs and opinions. It's the same agenda that underlay OFSTED's iron-fist response to the fake "Trojan Horse plot" in Birmingham Muslim-majority schools, where it labelled schools which were originally rated as outstanding as inadequate because they did not teach sufficient sex education and discouraged boys and girls from socialising with each other. It is the same agenda behind the OFSTED inspectors' questioning of Muslim children about their views on homosexuality. And it is the same agenda that led to OFSTED attacking Al-Hijrah Muslim School in Birmingham for separating its male and female students, accusing it of being discriminatory, and which resulted in the court ruling that mixed schools in Britain could no longer segregate boys and girls. It is this intrusive 'big-brother' agenda against the Muslim community, and NOT Islamic beliefs and practices, *which are "actively perverting the purpose of education" and "indoctrinating impressionable minds with extremist SECULAR ideology"!*

2. OFSTED's head-locking of schools and teachers who refuse to follow this authoritarian, counter-productive, "*muscular liberal*" approach towards dealing with the religious sensitivities of their students, as well as Spielman's alarmist and provocative language towards basic Islamic beliefs and practices is aimed at intimidating Muslim parents and their children into diluting their Islamic identity as well as creating fear amongst the wider society towards Islam to galvanise support for their draconian anti-Islamic policies.

3. The argument that Muslim girls under puberty are not obliged to wear the hijab, that is being used to justify hijab bans in primary schools, is a complete red-herring! What they are really saying is that young Muslim girls should not have the right to identify with their Islamic roots at school; that Muslim parents should not have the right to build Islamic beliefs and practices in their children from a young age; and that fundamentally the Islamic dress degrades women. As Muslim parents, teachers and a community we recognise that our Muslim daughters live in a society where they face huge peer pressure to fit into the social norms of their friends and others around them, and where they are constantly told that the Islamic dress is backward, ugly and oppressive, and what is beautiful is what they see of the images and fashions of the singers, models and actresses in the media. Therefore, we understand that getting our Muslim girls accustomed to and confident in wearing the Islamic dress should start before puberty when it does become an Islamic obligation upon them.

Preventing our daughters from wearing the hijab at primary school is clearly a means to prevent Muslim parents from achieving this goal. As the future mothers of the Muslim Ummah, who will be raising the future Muslim generation in this country, one can understand why targeting the Islamic identity of our daughters would be a clear priority for those die-hard secularist governments, politicians, and institutions who seek to de-Islamicise the Muslim community in the UK.

4. It beggars belief that Spielman can insinuate that Islamic beliefs and practices can cause isolation and harm cohesion between communities while completely ignoring the role that highly emotive and alarmist statements like hers can have in evoking suspicion, hatred and even violence between different communities. It is this same warped narrative against Islam that far-right extremists feed off to peddle their anti-Muslim drivel and hatred. Spielman's derogatory comments regarding the hijab for example, will only add to the significant prejudice and hostility that Muslim women who wear the Islamic dress currently face in the UK. The OFSTED Chief's provocative unsubstantiated claims that *'religious extremists are using schools to actively pervert the purpose of education'* came in the same week in which Darren Osborne was sentenced to 43 years imprisonment for driving his van into a crowd of Muslim worshippers near a north London mosque, killing one and injuring many others. He was apparently radicalised in a matter of weeks by anti-Muslim material he viewed on TV and accessed online. Surely his case should be a stark reminder to those in positions of responsibility and influence in this country of the dangerous impact their irresponsible inflammatory Islamophobic statements, such as labelling basic Islamic beliefs as "fundamentalist practices", can have on individuals and in fanning the flames of division and violence between communities.

5. It is laughable that the head of OFSTED can claim that wearing a headscarf could be viewed as the sexualisation of young girls, while 'sex and relationship' lessons which expose young children to sexual ideas and images and strip them of their innocence are conducted in primary schools across the country. Furthermore, while children and youth in the UK are subjected to a hypersexualised culture on TV, in music, online and in the general society, and while young girls and women are sexualized by the advertising, beauty and entertainment industries due to the celebration of liberal sexual freedoms, it is ludicrous and highly irresponsible that a government institution should choose to focus on a religious dress associated with modesty rather than addressing the true causes of the sexualisation of young girls and children. Indeed, it is only within a hypersexualised society that a symbol of modesty would be *"interpreted as the sexualisation of young girls"*. Furthermore, the idea that the hijab is linked to the sexualisation of girls or women is a concept that has its roots in colonial orientalist thinking. Surely such backward outdated narratives should have no place in the classrooms and school policies of modern-day Britain.

6. We are living at a time when young girls face huge pressures to conform to media generated images of beauty and body size that is crippling their self-esteem and confidence and contributing heavily to an epidemic of eating disorders amongst the youth. Surely therefore, those involved in education who have a genuine concern for the welfare of young girls should be focussing their efforts on addressing this debilitating problem, rather than attacking a dress-code which is based upon a viewpoint which steers girls and women away from the obsession with looks and builds within them the confidence to reject the pressure to follow the crowd.

The claim that hijab bans in primary schools is a means to protect those 'many' girls who are being forced to wear the dress, or that children at that age do not have the ability to form their own religious convictions hence parents must be imposing the hijab upon them, is purely speculative and based on absolutely no empirical evidence. It holds echoes of the Stasi Commission in France, which was set up by the French government to study whether

there should be a headscarf ban in French schools. The Commission supported the ban based upon the assertion that the majority of girls who wore the hijab were forced to do so. However, they failed to hear a single testimony from those girls who had been expelled from their schools due to their headscarf. Moreover, this idea that primary school girls are being forced to wear the hijab because they are too young to form their own religious beliefs, is based on a bigoted view towards the children of Muslims. Why is it that children in these liberal societies apparently have the mental capacity to understand 'sex and relationship' issues or choose which gender they wish to be and even go through transgender transitioning but Muslim primary girls do not have the capacity to decide which values they identify with? In truth, it is hijab bans in primary or secondary schools which force Muslim girls to leave a religious practice which is important to their Islamic identity.

1. Fundamentally, this debate is not really about whether the hijab should be banned in primary schools, but rather about what place does religion have within a secular society and whether the secular system is able to maintain harmony between all communities and ensure those of all religious faiths feel respected and protected. Any system that struggles to accommodate the deeply held religious sensitivities of its citizens or force-feeds its ideological viewpoint to those who hold a different belief, or where the rights of religious minorities can be discarded based upon whoever is in power, is surely not a sound or stable model of governance. What kind of system is it for example, that downgrades rather than praises school leaders who are sensitive to the religious beliefs of their students? What kind of system is it where tolerance is defined as ignoring and offending the religious sensitivities of your community? And what kind of system feels that adopting a Stalinist approach that defines as 'extremist' any belief that does not fit into the restrictive secular liberal mould, and that sets school and uniform policies that disregard the deeply held religious views of parents, is the best way to create a cohesive and harmonious school environment? If anything, Amanda Spielman's comments simply provide further evidence of the flaws, failures and dangers of the secular system which separates religion from public life and where rules and regulations can be made upon the whims and prejudices of those who rule.

2. At this time, when as a Muslim community in Britain, we face this intensive agenda and hostility against our Deen from many elements of the society, it is vital that we continue to strongly voice our opposition to and stand against any attempts to tarnish or make us and our children leave our Islamic beliefs. We also need to build within our children a deep understanding and appreciation of their Deen as well as strengthen their Iman so that they will hold onto their Islamic identity and practices with confidence and defend them with *hikma* (wisdom) and strength of argument. And finally, when attacks against our Islamic beliefs arise, our duty is not only to protect our way of life but to present it as an alternative system to organise the affairs of mankind in a just and harmonious manner. One example, is how the Islamic ruling system guarantees its religious minorities the right to practice their religious beliefs under the full protection of the law and does not tolerate any individual to demonize or harm them or violate their religious rights in any way. This is the result of a system that is defined by the All-Knowing Creator (swt) rather than the fickle and limited minds of human beings.

﴿إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَامُوا فَلَا خَوْفَ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ \* أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا جَزَاءَ بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ﴾

***“Verily, those who say, ‘Our Rabb (Lord) is (only) Allah and thereafter stand firm and straight (on the Islamic belief) on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve. Such shall be the dwellers of Jannah (paradise), abiding therein (forever), a reward for what they used to do.” [TMQ Al-Ahqaf: 13-14]***

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