

22 September 2017



The Rt. Hon Justine Greening MP
Secretary of State for Education, Minister for Women
and Equalities
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Dear Ms Greening

Compulsory wearing of hijab in schools

We write with concerns that British school children are being forced to wear the hijab and other items of religious clothing whilst at school.

Our research (included as an attachment) indicates that girls as young as four are being made to wear the hijab as part of an official school uniform policy. The wearing of the hijab appears to be compulsory in eight of the 23 publicly funded Islamic schools that accept girls – including in three primary schools.

The majority of independent Muslim schools also require the hijab to be worn, including one school that further requires children's faces to be covered outside of the school.

All schools have a duty to 'actively promote' individual liberty, to ensure young people leave school prepared for life in modern Britain.

In our view, the forcing of a child to wear the hijab, or any other item of religious clothing, is entirely at odds with this fundamental British value and with wider human rights norms on children's rights. This conflict needs to be addressed.

We are further concerned that a number of non-Islamic schools appear to be acceding to fundamentalist pressure to incorporate the hijab into their uniform. Whilst we fully support efforts to allow children from Muslim backgrounds to better integrate, a desire to be 'inclusive' should not automatically lead to the accommodation of illiberal and repressive cultural norms.

Given the 'justifications' that lie behind so called 'modesty' codes, and its implicit sexualisation of children, we regard it as a matter of deep regret that so many schools are facilitating young girls being dressed in the hijab.

Whilst policies permitted the wearing of the hijab are so often framed in terms of choice and freedom, we urge you to recognise that this 'freedom' is often dictated by social pressure.

Education policy should empower girls and help them to make their own decisions once they are ready to do so. We therefore call on you to work alongside Ofsted to ensure that girls from Muslim backgrounds are supported to have free choices,

rather than having so called 'modesty' codes imposed on them. No child should be obliged to wear the hijab, or any other article of religious clothing, whilst at school.

With regard to accommodations made by other schools, we urge you to issue guidance that makes it clear that a decision not to incorporate the hijab into a school uniform will be supported by the Government. The guidance should also make clear that the freedom to make accommodations to allow the wearing of the hijab does not extend to primary schools.

We would be keen to meet with you to discuss these concerns and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Director, National Secular Society

Sara Khan, Director and Co-founder, Inspire

Amina Lone, Co-Director of the Social Action & Research Foundation

Pragna Patel, director of Southall Black Sisters.

Gina Khan, Spokesperson, One Law for All

Yasmin Rehman, Women and Human Rights Activist

Iram Ramzan, Journalist

Zehra Zaidi, Director of Stand up, social activist and former Conservative PPC