

PRESS RELEASE

TROJAN HORSE: Those who have failed children should be held accountable

Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) welcome the finding in both Peter Clarke's and Ian Kershaw's reports, that overall there is no evidence of promoting violent extremism in the schools investigated, although the report by Peter Clarke makes reference to some specific concerns of extremism. MWNUK has maintained that the 'Trojan Horse' debate should not have been about extremism but about very serious governance issues. It is important not to conflate religious conservatism with extremist agendas. Given the current hostility towards Muslims, the initial language used to frame the debate by some sections of the media and some government leaders and officials has been unhelpful. It has had the effect of increasing Muslim vulnerability to Islamophobia. However, it is also important that 'no evidence of extremism' is not used to continue to downplay the very serious findings of malpractice in the reports either.

We all have a duty to keep children safe and ensure they are treated equally regardless of their race, faith or gender. MWNUK therefore believes any concerns regarding children should always be acted upon. Despite local criticisms, it was right to investigate a number of schools in Birmingham after the 'Trojan Horse' letter emerged. Community sensitivities should never be prioritised over the safeguarding of children.

The findings in the OFSTED reports, the Birmingham City Council report by Ian Kershaw and Department of Education report by Peter Clarke must now be acted upon. Individuals and organisations that have failed Birmingham's children should all be held accountable. No-one should be protected whether they are considered respected members of the local Muslim community or because they are people in high positions of authority in local or central government. Everyone has failed the children and no-one can claim the moral high ground. OFSTED failed because they rated the schools as outstanding during initial inspections as they only focused on results and ignored the quality of the curriculum and safeguarding issues. The local authority and Department of Education failed to act on previous complaints and lacked adequate oversight. A small number of religiously conservative individuals exploited their positions as governors and staff to promote hardline ideologies and behaved like moral police in state secular schools.

Some local campaigners too have failed the school pupils. They seemed to play down serious concerns about school governance by portraying them as 'normal HR issues.' Very real fears of Islamophobia have also been exploited by invariably stating there had been a targeted 'witch hunt.' Their complacency in the face of opposing views being ignored and silenced resulted in witnesses feeling unable to speak out. While we congratulate the schools for their high educational achievements, these should never be used as an excuse to turn a blind eye to misogyny, intolerance towards other faiths and safeguarding failures.

This narrative, which gained predominance, needs to be challenged. It was for this reason that the Chair of MWNUK, Shaista Gohir, began to voice concerns publicly. However, this resulted in a social media hate and abuse campaign being waged against her. When she refused to be silenced the abuse was escalated and her children were threatened; this was reported to the police. The MWNUK board strongly condemns the bullying and harassment that she and others have been subjected to for speaking out on this issue.

We also commend the bravery of those who were courageous and came forward and gave vital evidence to the investigators, some of whom also contacted MWNUK, considered an impartial and trusted organisation. As a women's rights organisation MWNUK are horrified at the numerous concerns raised directly with us especially with regards issues of equality and diversity. We were told about segregation in some classes and assemblies. Expected seating arrangements were made clear to pupils so they would self-segregate and which is now being presented as the choice of pupils themselves. Not wearing the headscarf has also been presented as a pupil choice. However, it was reported to us that pressure was exerted on girls who did not wear the hijab. We were informed that they would be reminded in certain Islamic Studies lessons and assemblies that "girls with morals wore the hijab." Such incidents upset girls and particular male Muslim teachers also told them they were not good Muslim girls because they did not cover their heads. Some boys also picked up this rhetoric and repeated it.

Witnesses also told us that boys and girls were warned not to sit too close to each other at break time and if these warnings were repeatedly ignored parents were called in. In another case a male member of staff allegedly hacked into a girl's mobile phone and informed her parents about its contents. It is clear that there is little regard for the safety and well being of girls as, arguably such actions could increase the risk of honour based violence and forced marriages. School staff have a duty to protect children from bullying and not participate in it themselves.

Violence against women including sexual violence should be condemned, yet marital rape was condoned as some boys were taught that a wife is not allowed to refuse sex. Intimidation was a feature in many of the accounts including pressure to pray. For example, in one incident posters were put on walls to say that anyone who didn't pray was a 'kafir' or unbeliever, considered the worst thing that a Muslim can be accused of. Other concerns included a narrow arts curriculum, anti-Western rhetoric, discrimination and systematic pushing out of any non-Muslim and Muslim members of staff who were challenging the hardline ethos of senior management and governors.

We hope that lessons are learned and that children in the schools concerned are finally put first, through the establishment of mechanisms to prevent such incidents of malpractice happening again and by ensuring that new managers and staff understand their duties as state school educators. It is also important to not only focus only on the tiny minority of religiously conservative Muslims who may be targeting schools as people with hardline religious views exist in all communities. We should be consistent in challenging anyone who discriminates against others because of their, gender, race, faith, disability, age and sexuality – only then can we build strong and cohesive societies.

Additional Notes

1. Contacts for Media interviews:

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2. **About Muslim Women's Network UK:** MWNUK is the only national Muslim women's organisation in Britain and our offices are based in Birmingham. We are a women's rights organisation with more than 600 members across the UK with a collective reach of tens of thousands of women. The website address for MWNUK is: www.mwnuk.co.uk

3. **Media Ownership and Plurality:** In October 2013, MWNUK responded to the government's consultation on Media Ownership and Plurality where we highlighted the lack of balanced reporting by some sections of the media, which can be found here: <http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/resourcesDetail.php?id=99>