
EXAMINING THE ASSERTION THAT THE 'ĤIJĀB' SEXUALIZES CHILDREN AND THE EXPERIENCE OF MUSLIM GIRLS WEARING HIJAB IN 21ST CENTURY UK

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to examine assertions by Amanda Spielman, UK chief school inspector, that expectations on young girls to wear a Ĥijāb (Islamic headscarf), sexualizes them. Spielman issued a new policy of interrogating prepubescent schoolchildren about Ĥijāb in November 2017. The research further explored the impact of Ĥijāb on the lived experiences of girls in the UK. Spielman's interviews, speeches, reports, along with contemporaneous events, global conflicts, and government policies were examined for context. Simultaneously, Islamic scriptures (Qur'ān), traditions of Prophet Muhammad □ and scholarly exegesis on the topic were reviewed. Census data, conception data and government data on sexualization of schoolgirls were also analysed for trends related to Ĥijāb. The study found little evidence to support Spielman's assertions on sexualization by Ĥijāb. Islamic scripture was found to consistently oppose and mitigate the sexualization and abuse of girls. New primary data was obtained through 150 survey interviews, predominantly of Ĥijāb-wearing women on their experience of Ĥijāb and sexualization. Rather, trends of reduced

sexualization, and increased islamophobia were significantly observed in participant testimonies. Contemporary literature further traced sexualized imagery of the Hijāb to orientalist war propaganda, feminism, and colonialist portrayals of Muslims. Data on the sexualization of girls in the west and underage conception rate data for the UK indicated that Muslim girls suffered less sexualization than others. This research aims to critically examine policies targeting Muslims in UK schools. It also establishes a replicable survey that can give voice to Hijāb-wearing women and to track the consistency of these findings or any changing trends over time and geography.

Keywords: *Hijāb* (Headscarf), veil, school, sexualization, islamophobia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Far from an uncommon experience, maturing Muslims, raised in Europe and other western countries, quickly learned to spot flaws in the prevalent stereotypes of Muslims. However, in more recent years, untested, and at times, outrageous claims have been treated as fact by people in authority. These claims often form the basis of Muslim-targeted legislation and government policy. Securitisation and criminalisation of Islamic practices such as the wearing of the *Niqāb* (face cover) or *Hijāb* (head scarf) have been on the rise (Winter, 2006, p. 279). Justification for such drastic measures, in contradiction of apparently liberal western values, include the prevention of terrorism, radicalisation, public safety, and the promotion of secularism. However, many assertions argue that restricting religiosity is a form of rescue or safeguarding for Muslim girls, commonly perceived to be passive and oppressed by westerners (Winter, 2006, pp. 289–291). It can be argued that this justification is based on fear and ignorance, primary ingredients of prejudice; with little or no actual evidence to support links between criminalised Islamic practices and terrorism.

This research aims to single out a specific untested accusation about the wearing of *Hijāb* by Muslim schoolchildren in UK. In 2017, Amanda Spielman, the head of Ofsted and chief inspector of schools in the UK adopted a new recommendation questioning Muslim schoolgirls as young as five years old, claiming that, “creating an environment where primary school children are expected to wear the *Hijāb* could be interpreted as sexualisation of young girls” (Adams, 2017).

The contextual backdrop to this comment includes a 2014 'Trojan Horse' scandal involving a handful of state-funded schools in the city of Birmingham. School leadership were allegedly 'infiltrated' by 'extremist Muslims' to 'Islamize' the schools, which led to a crackdown on Muslim habits, attitudes, and values in schools across the nation, particularly in Islamic faith schools. Jobs were lost, prosecutions commenced, and many Muslim children faced state interrogation about their views on homosexuality, evolution, headscarves, and their religion.

Counter-terrorism measures titled 'Prevent' were introduced monitoring children susceptible to 'radicalisation,' with the onus on teachers and other professionals to identify and refer children to counter-terrorism authorities. These measures were widely criticised as being largely racist, Islamophobic and stigmatising. Without any real guidelines or protections in place, teachers relied largely on gut feeling and personal biases to select children for referral, and young Muslim girls were routinely referred to Prevent, on suspected grounds of radicalization, often citing nothing more than their *Hijāb* as evidence.

This research seeks to objectively discover the basis, if any exists, for the assertion by Amanda Spielman, that an environment where young girls are expected to wear the *Hijāb*, in fact, sexualises them. It further seeks to explore the impact of wearing the *Hijāb* on girls' experiences considering comments and policies like these. The topic will be further explored by scrutinizing UK government policies that directly affect the lives of Muslims in the UK, as well as the assumptions

that they are based upon. It will inform individuals, schools and government about the impact and consequences of these policies and promote greater tolerance, equality of opportunity and community understanding.

The paper will seek to answer the following key questions,

- (i) What were the intended aims, according to Islamic scriptures, of wearing the *Hijāb*, and were there any Islamic interpretations of the *Hijāb* that involved sexualisation of young, or older, girls?
- (ii) Are young girls in the 21st century sexualised by their clothing, and have young Muslim girls been, or are they more or less likely to be, sexualised in the UK?
- (iii) Where else, besides the above, might Amanda Spielman have obtained the notion that the *Hijāb* sexualises young girls?

This paper hypothesises that the *Hijāb* is not a sexualising article of clothing, rather it is consistently interpreted by Muslims throughout the ages as an obstruction to objectification, sexualisation and a protection from harassment. The paper further hypothesises that Muslim girls in the UK are less likely to be sexualised at a young age than their peers, and that assertions of sexualisation through the *Hijāb* are based not on evidence, but on fear, ignorance, and prejudice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Literature in Response to Spielman's Policy

There has been much criticism of Amanda Spielman's 2017 comments and attitudes toward the *Hijāb* and Muslim schools. Multiple Muslim organisations accused Spielman of clear unlawful discrimination "In as much as it applies only to Muslim pupils," (Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2017) and expressing concern about her "apparent linking of young girls wearing the headscarf to "fundamentalist groups influencing school policy"." (Khan H. , 2017) The largest teachers union also argued that her "regressive leadership - and the media coverage linked to them - may have normalised hate speech and hate crime" (National Education Union, 2018, p. 2). Others also associated her with an increase in hate crimes targeting Muslim girls for a variety of remarks from her that demonised the *Hijāb* (Stand Up To Racism, 2018).

Conversely, Spielman also received support from public critics of the *Hijāb*, such as Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2017), purportedly representing "modernist" and "progressive UK Muslims" against "regressive" and "conservative Muslims." Alibhai-Brown argued that, by interrogating girls wearing *Hijāb*, "Ofsted is protecting the liberties of those girls" and claims that "when a girl child is covered up, she is being sexualised in exactly the same way as a girl child in a padded bikini top or belly-dancing outfit" (Alibhai-Brown, 2017).

There is already much literature on the subject of the *Hijāb*, its place in Islam, its purpose in either liberating or subjugating women and whether it has a place in secular society or not

(Wazni, 2015; Bi, 2018; Furseth, 2011). However, there is little academic discussion on Amanda Spielman's specific remarks and policies on the *Hijāb*, or the basis for the assertions of sexualisation that she has built those policies upon. This begs the question -- where did the assertion come from, if not from actual academic findings about sexualisation of young girls, and have these theories ever been tested or scrutinized?

2.2 Islamic Scripture

A far cry from the perception of subjugation promoted by orientalist, Islamic academic texts overwhelmingly point to a desire to combat sexualisation and sexual harassment by men described with 'diseases in their hearts' (al-Qur'ān, p. 33:59; Tabari; ibn-Katheer). In fact, the protection of women, their honour, dignity, or chastity is listed as one of the five main targets of the Islamic law by the predominant view of Islamic scholars throughout history (Kamali, 1999). It is not from most respectable men, that women might fear, but the small unavoidable subsection of misogynistic men, who, to this day, continue to sexually harass and harm women, generation after generation. It is accepted that women globally continue to suffer from physical and psychological exploitation by abusive men in positions of power. This was also true before the advent of Islam. An objective view of the laws introduced during the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, reveals a campaign of empowerment for women, and an institution of rights, respect and dignity that they had previously been denied, This includes the prohibition of compelling visitors to the Ka'ba to circumambulate naked, and prescribing the *Hijāb*, the lowering

of the gaze and prohibition of harassing girls (Kamali, 1999; Al-Fawzan, 2005).

2.3 The Orientalist Lens

Other writers, typically orientalists, paint a very different picture. They interpret the *Hijāb* as a symbol of subjugation and oppression by men (Wazni, 2015, pp. 330–331). In contrast, Muslims tend to view the *Hijāb* as a symbol of freedom, chastity, and dignity (Bijdiguen, 2015, p. 280; Wazni, 2015, p. 329). Similar symbolism has been found in other cultures such as the Christian habit worn by celibate nuns, who are perceived as sexless and pious in the west (Holscher, 2012), with little orientalist awareness of the obvious double standard. Further examination has revealed that much of the sexualising stereotypes of veiled Muslim women, Ottoman harems and Muslim subjugation of women were identified as a result of the imagination of western travellers, frustrated by a lack of actual interaction or access to the female nobility separated in Ottoman societies (Bijdiguen, 2015., pp. 37–38). It has also been suggested that this is a common propaganda tactic dating back to the 13th century crusades to justify conquest and colonisation. The same propaganda has been argued to have been repeated in recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Bijdiguen, 2015, p. 40; Wazni, 2015, p. 326).

2.4 Data on *Hijāb* and Sexualization

While there is some research investigating the proportion of women who wear the *Hijāb* as a personal choice as opposed to being pressured by men (Rita, 2017; Wazni, 2015, p. 328), there is a need for more data to confirm or refute the conflicting

claims. But most of these modern discussions about *Hijāb* symbolism and sexualisation are entirely theoretical, with little or no academic investigation to measure whether Muslim women, *Hijāb* wearing or otherwise, are more sexualised compared to their counterparts. Equally, there is much information on what actually sexualizes young girls in the UK and abroad through media, movies, TV, music, magazines, advertising and pornography (Lamb & Koven, 2019, pp. 2-4). Clothing also has been cited as a sexualising factor for young girls, namely clothes that highlight sexualised body parts, lingerie, and revealing outfits (Lamb & Koven, 2019, p. 4) – the very opposite of Islamic *Hijāb*.

While there exists no attempt to directly track conception ages by religion, Heap et al strongly argue on a correlation between the rapid decline of the teenage pregnancy rate in the UK during the 21st century and the corresponding rise in high numbers of second and third generation ethnic minorities in London (Heap et al., 2020, p. 3). There are gaps in any research linking the *Hijāb* to an impact of pregnancy rate, but census data would indicate that the predominant religion of the increased ethnic minorities in question would be Islam. It also counts the overall percentage of Muslims in the UK as being less than 6.5% (Census 2021, 2022). While it is not suggested that all Muslim women wear *Hijāb*, the significance of such a disproportionate impact on the average English conception age lends strong support for the suggestion that, overall, young Muslim girls are not sexualised by their religion, or their religious community, but that their religion has a profound preventative effect against sexualisation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Primary Data: Interviews with Muslim women who wear the *Hijāb*

Interviews were conducted via an online survey form without face-to-face interaction or influence. The form contained two identity questions (identifying a respondent's gender, *Hijāb*-wearing status and global location) and two research questions, one open and the other, closed:

- (a) The closed question was as follows: "Do you feel women are more or less sexualized by wearing the *Hijāb*?"

Four options were offered:

- (i) More sexualised,
 - (ii) Less sexualised,
 - (iii) No difference,
 - (iv) Not sure.
- (b) The open-ended question with an opportunity for respondents' own words, was as follows: "(If applicable) What is your experience as a result of wearing the *Hijāb*, whether good, bad, or both?"

3.2 Sampling

Invitations to complete the survey were made publicly without restriction on various social media platforms including Telegram and WhatsApp, encouraging audiences to forward the survey

to their contacts. Initial posts were made to forums with high populations of Muslim students. Although this research focused on the experience of Muslim girls in the UK, no location restrictions were placed on the survey and foreign respondents were not discouraged. In addition, no details of the topic of the research were provided, and no context was offered. This was done to avoid bias or influence on the results. A Google login was required to complete the survey, to allow authentication and prevent duplicate or fraudulent entries. Login data was held securely, and respondent privacy was always assured.

3.3 Secondary Research

This research also adopted a qualitative methodology utilizing secondary research. Objective consideration was given to the possibility that the *Hijāb* genuinely might aim to sexualize girls, and that it may achieve this purpose. Statements and interpretations of classical scholars were also considered to identify whether this assertion was made, perceived, or targeted by early and later Muslims or their scholars. The origins of western perceptions of the *Hijāb* were also investigated considering these findings and other research.

Data from UNICEF, UN and census data was analysed as key indicators of sexualization in young girls and attempts to identify data on *Hijāb*-wearing Muslims. Teenage pregnancy rates were utilized with a broad assumption that there is a logical link between sexualization and the rate of early pregnancy, the ultimate consequence of sex. Census data were analysed to aid bridging the gaps concerning religion and ethnicity, as *Hijāb*-wearing was rarely tracked in the cited statistics.

Further investigations were done on speeches, interviews, and writings by Amanda Spielman, to identify any context, evidence or assumptions relied upon for her assertions about the *Hijāb*. Existing literature on women's experiences of wearing the *Hijāb* and sexualization generally, were examined. Data relating to women, young girls, and sexualization from the Office of National Statistics in the UK and literature considering the origins of western orientalist perceptions of the *Hijāb* were also collated and considered in relation to the assertion of sexualization.

Relevant verses of the Qur'ān that address clothing, the *Hijāb* and sexualization were closely examined, along with relevant Ḥadīth literature. Contemporary literature on the purpose, aims and scriptural explanations of the Islamic laws on female dress, both Muslim and non-Muslim in origin were also considered.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The *Hijāb* Interviews

There has been much discussion, assertions, claims and European saviourism in the quest for understanding the role of *Hijāb*. Great prominence and credibility have been granted to non-Muslim, and non-*Hijāb* wearing men and women, while at the same time displaying a harsh dismissiveness and disregard for the objections of actual women wearing the *Hijāb*. The distinct lack of access and disempowerment of actual *Hijāb*-wearing Muslim women voices in this debate has been palpable. While theoretical analyses of ancient scripture, academic interpretation and propaganda can take a reader on a roller coaster of positions and counter-opinions, the ultimate

testimony to the lived experience of wearing a *Hijāb* lies in the wearers themselves. Answering this vacuum of testimony, this research collated 150 interview responses, with highly insightful results.

4.1.1 Interview Respondents

The survey was left open to public access for two months, from 2nd April 2022 to 2nd June 2022. 150 people responded from 28 different countries, of which 23 (15.3%) were men, and 127 (84.7%) were women (including 123 wearing *Hijāb*, 2 Muslim women not wearing *Hijāb*, and 2 non-Muslims). 93 (81 women and 12 men) of these respondents were from countries with a minority Muslim population, including 35 from India, 32 from UK and 6 from USA. Significantly, all respondents from UK were women, three of whom did not wear *Hijāb* and/or were not Muslim.

4.1.2 Evidence of Reduced Sexualisation

Focusing on results among UK respondents, while also making some global comparisons, it was noteworthy that, of all the UK respondents, only 1 (3%) respondent felt more sexualized by wearing the *Hijāb*, 5 (16%) felt it made no difference to sexualization, and 3 (9%) were not sure. Significantly, 23 (72%) UK respondents considered the *Hijāb* to cause reduction in sexualization. These results were largely replicated in other countries with a similar ratio of responses in all countries. Across all respondents, 4% felt it was more sexualizing, 8% felt it made no difference, 11% were not sure and 77% felt the *Hijāb* resulted in a reduction in sexualization.

Insights from open answers to the second question elaborate further on these results. In total, 6 respondents felt that women are more sexualised by wearing the *Hijāb*. However, of these, 2 respondents were male, and so made no further comments in the open question. The other respondents were women wearing *Hijāb* and described largely positive experiences wearing *Hijāb*. One described her experience as “Good”, another described negative experiences linked to Islamophobic prejudice and makes no mention of sexualisation. A third woman qualified her choice attributing sexualising not to the *Hijāb*, but to the attitudes of men,

“I don’t thin[k] there is anything difference in us women, wearing hijab or not. The way people sexualise us is alarming. Even if no part of us are seen, men have a bad mind and they sexualise us in ways even I will flinch thinking [sic].”

4.1.3 Greater Sexualization

The remaining respondent was the only UK based interview that felt women were more sexualised by the *Hijāb*. She described her experience wearing *Hijāb* as “beautiful” and said that at times she felt “like a princess,” and felt a “... real sense of community within *hijabis* and it feels like a sisterhood.” She also pointed to an alarming new trend in social media fetishizing women in *Hijāb* as a potential cause for sexualisation: “as I’m getting older, I’m starting to get see a shift in the perception of Muslim hijabi women,” she adds, “People have sexualised the hijab/niqab as this mysterious cloth and so they develop strange fantasies because of it.” She also reported experiencing greater catcalling compared with other women.

This lends support to the theory that Eurocentric colonial historians had exploited the mystery around unattainable Muslim women, and invented sexualised fantasies intended as provocative propaganda against the Ottoman and Arabian cultures.

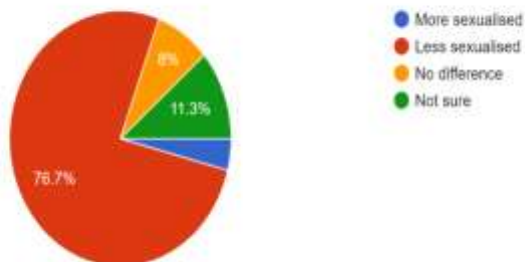
4.1.4 *Negative Experiences*

Despite feeling that women are less sexualised by the *Hijāb*, other respondents also emphasized some negative experiences and trends of sexualisation while wearing *Hijāb*, such as feeling as though it is entirely a woman's "responsibility if men are attracted to them ..." or a perception that *Hijāb*-wearing women are purer, and therefore, more desirable. Though insightful, and not to be ignored, these experiences were anomalous and anecdotal. Comparatively, 23 (15% of all) comments, of which 12 were from the UK (37.5% of UK interviewees), specifically reported experiencing a reduction in catcalling, sexual harassment and sexualisation from strangers.

It is also noteworthy that none of the respondents identified the *Hijāb* as an intended cause or means for sexualisation but pointed to the nature or negative sexualising attitudes of some men as the reason for feeling sexualised. This would support the notion that the *Hijāb* is not worn or encouraged with the aim of sexualisation, but in fact, the opposite, to reduce sexual harassment and improve the quality of life of women.

Do you feel women are more or less sexualized by wearing the hijab?

150 responses



4.1.5 Sexual Harassment Trend

Respondents displayed an alarming trend of experiencing or witnessing sexual harassment by men as a part of daily life. Nearly 20% (25 of 127) of all women interviewed mentioned experiences of catcalling or other sexual harassment. This was higher in the UK, at 44% (14 of 32 interviews). This indicates a very sad fact of modern life for women in UK and the rest of the world. However, another significant trend is the notable difference wearing a *Hijāb* makes to the incidence and experience of sexual harassment. As mentioned above, 12 out of 14 UK respondents (86%) that discussed sexual harassment, experienced a noticeable reduction of harassing behaviour due to wearing the *Hijāb*. UK respondent No.4 reported, "When I started wearing an abaya, guys stopped standing/sitting too close to me, and stopped saying vulgar/ inappropriate speech around me," and respondent no. 20 experienced, "fewer stares

on the street, no catcalling, significantly less attention from men in general ...”

4.1.6 Islamophobia Trend

A second trend pointed to another disturbing reality. 37 women mentioned some kind of negative experience because of wearing the *Hijāb*, of which 78% (29 out of 37) pointed to some form(s) of islamophobia. Although a smaller sample in the UK, interviews echoed a similar ratio of 71% mentioning islamophobia (10 out of 14 negative experiences). It should be noted that, these responses were unprompted and so, while these women chose to highlight this experience, it cannot be presumed that other interviewees did not also experience islamophobia. The comments of UK respondent no. 9 were representative of many other interviews:

“The positive effect is that I can protect myself from self-hatred imposed by beauty standards. I can also be recognised as a fellow Muslim visibly if any sisters need help. I felt very much liberated from anyone's else's rules and only follow for Allah. The downside is the prejudice and islamophobia in public. At times I can tell when someone is visibly uncomfortable with me and its mainly due to my hijab.”

And respondent no. 136 said,

“Racism and islamophobia are a big problem in UK and as a 15-year-old *hijabi* girl, I have experienced my fair share also. I have had remarks said to me by people, about my hijab and comments about me being a ‘criminal’ and etc just because I wear hijab.”

4.1.7 Positive Experiences Trend

The biggest trend of all, however, was a consistently positive experience described by 84% (105 out of 125) *Hijāb*-wearing interviewees, including 94% of all UK respondents (30 or 32). 44% of all *Hijāb*-wearing respondents used the most common keyword “good”, and other repeated positive themes (in order of frequency) included respect, safety, protection, and empowerment. UK Respondent No. 34 said,

“Personally, my experience has mostly been positive. Wearing the hijab gives me a chance to control the sexualization of my body, also it forces people to judge me based on my personality and achievements instead of my looks. The thing that people don’t understand is that hijab doesn’t just mean covering the head, it also requires you to dress modestly (e.g., covering the chest, legs etc.). The only negative side is that wearing the hijab gives people the opportunity to make racist remarks, which I have experienced many times.”

And UK Respondent no. 142 said, “I feel more confident, empowered, people recognise me for my skills and qualities not my looks.”

4.2 Amanda Spielman on the *Hijāb* and Muslims

4.2.1 Amanda Spielman on *Islam* and Sexualisation

Spielman asserts repeatedly that she is neither racist nor Islamophobic (Spielman, Amanda Spielman’s speech to the Policy Exchange think tank, 2018). Addressing the Muslim Teachers’ Association, she takes the time to praise the achievements of Muslim teachers, leadership and

acknowledges that “four of the top ten performing schools for progress in the country” were Islamic faith schools. She also condemns discrimination as “a persistent and insidious threat across our society and the wider world,” acknowledging its persistence in the education system, the “importance” of combatting it, and encouraging dialogue as a vital ingredient to tolerance and understanding. (Spielman, Amanda Spielman at the Muslim Teachers' Association, 2019)

However, Spielman has been embroiled in other controversies surrounding Muslims. In 2018, Spielman publicly supported a ban on *Hijābs* in a primary school, later overturned by parent pressure. Spielman defended the decision to ban in a TV interview, asserting that she was simply empowering headteachers to autonomously make such decisions. But tellingly, she emphasised the ban as being “the right decision,” overtly expressing a value judgment opposing the *Hijāb* (Spielman, Ofsted: Hijab ban 'not Islamophobic' - BBC Newsnight, 2018). Further controversy related to Muslim parents, who argued that the pro-homosexuality sex-education policy sexualizes their children. She labelled the protests as “intimidating” and called for dialogue. However, she again revealed attitudes towards traditional Muslim values, suggesting that they were not “prepared for life in a diverse, modern, progressive country like ours.” (Spielman, Amanda Spielman at the Muslim Teachers' Association, 2019)

Spielman defended her opposition of what she refers to as, the “expanding sense of religious and/or cultural entitlement.” She explained her reasons as threefold, to defend against community pressure undermining a headteacher’s authority

and “integration”. Secondly, she complained that extreme cases of building up religious identity limits “individual liberties, such as the right of a girl to enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities as a boy,” singling out an Islamic faith school for separating male and female students as an example. Thirdly, she reasoned a need to defend against the omission of UK curriculum that conflicted with a faith, such as sexuality or evolution (Spielman, Amanda Spielman’s speech to the Policy Exchange think tank, 2018).

4.2.2 Spielman on the Scale of Sexual Abuse Within UK Schools

In another speech, Spielman commented on a government report on the normalization of sexual harassment and the profound frequency of sexual harassment within UK schools and colleges, rising to as much as “67% of girls and young women aged 13-18” according to some research (Department for Education, 2021, pp. 7-8). These alarming statistics revealed a stark reality for many young girls of all cultures in the UK. It is notable that the extensive report made no reference to the *Hijāb* as a factor in sexualization. (Spielman, Amanda Spielman’s speech at the 2022 Schools and Academies Show, 2022).

4.3 Hijāb in Islamic Scripture

Academic and political debate about whether *Hijāb* or *Niqāb* is compulsory in Islam, a cultural choice, and appropriate in The West has raged for centuries. However, these questions are not relevant to this research. This research questions whether a requirement to wear the *Hijāb* is intended to sexualise young girls, and whether this is the lived experience of girls in the UK. Have these scriptures been interpreted, rightly or wrongly, in a

sexualising way, and what role does the *Ḥijāb* have in the subject?

4.3.1 Verses of “Ḥijāb”

There are two key verses of the Qur’ān relating to *Ḥijāb*,

And tell the believing women ... not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils all over *Juyūbihinna* (i.e. their bodies, faces, necks and bosoms) ... (al-Qur’ān, p. 24:31)

And,

O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies. That will be better, that they should be known (as free respectable women) so as not to be annoyed... (al-Qur’ān, p. 33:59)

4.3.2 Sexualisation in the Verses of *Ḥijāb*

Western critics have characterised these verses as oppressive, controlling of female bodies, and as “hatred of women” (Jans, 2008, p. 39). It is rare, however, to find an argument parallel to that of Ms Spielman’s, presenting the *Ḥijāb* or these verses as sexualising. It is argued that requesting women to clothe their bodies in front of men, draws attention to the sexuality of women (and men) instead of treating them as entirely asexual. This could, technically, fall under a definition of sexualisation. Ironically, another strand of feminism has long argued that suppressing a woman’s sexuality and enforcing asexuality to women is itself sexist and repressive (Willis, 1982, p. 4). Thus,

these verses are caught in an impossible position, where acknowledging and omitting women's sexuality are both cynically labelled oppressive by foreign eyes.

In the context of young children, perhaps Ms Spielman's intended by her comments, that the imposition of *Hijāb* on prepubescent girls means that they are being treated as adult sexual women might be. Considering her preamble on safeguarding in schools, this might make sense, but attaches an offensive innuendo. Ms Spielman was clearly not discussing a semantic technicality about the term 'sexualisation'. She was making a thinly veiled suggestion that young girls may secretly be suffering sexual violence, with the *Hijāb* painted as an indicator of sexual activity or availability for sex.

4.3.3 Children are Asexual

A closer examination of these and related scriptures undermined Ms Spielman's suggestions. The first verse in Surah Nur, explicitly describes children as being asexual "or small children who have no sense of feminine sex" (al-Qur'ān, p. 24:31). This asexuality is further exemplified in verses seeking to protect their innocence from nudity,

O you who believe! (Let) those among you who have not come to the age of puberty ask your permission (before they come to your presence) ... while you put off your clothes for the noonday (rest), and after the 'Ishā' (late-night) Salāt (prayer). (These) three times are of privacy for you... (al-Qur'ān, p. 24:58).

Further verses of the Qur'ān confirm that children are unaware of sexuality: "And try orphans (as regards their intelligence) until they reach the age of marriage ..." (al-Qur'ān, p. 4:6). This verse

describes a girl's ability to consent to marriage as based on physical and mental maturity. Classical Muslim scholars agreed that this refers to the age of adulthood, with an upper age limit of fifteen years (al-Qurtubi, p. 4:6). Nevertheless, parents of all global cultures teach young children to clothe themselves and conceal private parts from others as part of a natural education, preparation for adolescence and as protection from harmful strangers.

It is highly doubtful that this asexual attitude toward children in the Qur'ān would be conducive to the sexualization of children through an Islamic *Hijāb*. Conversely, Ms Spielman actively encourages sex education for children as young as five in primary schools, including discussions on genitalia, lesbianism, homosexuality, and transgenderism (Ofsted, 2021). It is noteworthy that according to government statistics, UK schools can sometimes be sexualized environments, and it could be argued that offering sex education to young children could be a sexualizing act in itself (Department for Education, 2021).

4.3.4 Asexual Contexts of *Hijāb*

The theory that *Hijāb* is a form of male sexual control or sexualizing women or girls, is undermined by Qur'ānic discussions on *Hijāb* in entirely asexual contexts, such as the widows of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as mothers to the believers (al-Qur'ān, p. 33:6), forever forbidden from intimacy, yet permitting speech with them only "... from behind a screen [*Hijāb*]." (al-Qur'ān, p. 33:53) The purpose of this *Hijāb* is not to sexualize but to offer respect like that offered to royalty in many other cultures. Furthermore, the Qur'ān stipulates covering of nakedness as the asexual proper attire for rituals,

“O Children of Adam! Take your adornment (by wearing your clean clothes), while praying and going round (the Tawâf of) the Ka'bah” (p. 7:31), thereby forbidding the pre-Islamic ritual, “... none will be allowed to perform the Tawaf of the Ka`ba undressed [naked]...” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. Hadith 3177)

4.3.5 Eradication of Sexual Aggression

The overarching theme of these verses acknowledges the reality of sexual harassment and exploitation, condemning it at every turn, “that they should be known (as free respectable women) so as not to be annoyed” (al-Qur'ān, p. 33:59) These two objectives, to be “known”, and “not to be annoyed” are significantly explained by traditions and exegeses as being revealed because “some men would sit about the streets aiming to flirt (sexually harass)” (Tabari, p. 33:59). So women were ordered to wear clothes (i.e. *Hijāb/Jilbāb*) distinguishing them as liberated, free, respectable women so they are “not harmed by those people of suspicious character, who would harass slave girls, and lest the Hypocrites transgress on free women as well.” (Tubrusi, p. 33:59) Imam Razi (d. 606AH) wrote that, before Islam, both free and enslaved women would walk uncovered, and would be harassed and followed by fornicators, hoping to flirt, then the *Hijāb* was revealed to distinguish free Muslim women and signal that they should not be approached by such harassment, and that “it is impossible to seek sex from them” (Razi, p. 33:59) or in other words, that they should not be sexualised or harassed by men. This inevitable presence of such misogynistic men in every generation, has preceded Islam and survived to this day, and the *Hijāb* was not ordained to instigate but to mitigate such sexualisation.

Islam further prohibited other pre-Islamic exploitative practices, “And force not your maids to prostitution...” (al-Qur’ān, p. 24:33) and, “You are forbidden to inherit women against their will; and you should not treat them with harshness” (al-Qur’ān, p. 4:19) and the Prophet ﷺ said, “A virgin should not be married till she is asked for her consent; and the matron should not be married till she is asked whether she agrees to marry or not.” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. Hadith 6968)

4.3.6 Responsibility for the Male Gaze and Sexualisation

It could also be argued that the *Hijāb* places responsibility for warding off the male gaze upon girls, thereby sexualising her and blaming her, while absolving men for sexualisation. However, the cited verses of *Hijāb* are preceded by the verse, “Tell the believing men to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts)” (al-Qur’ān, p. 24:30) In fact, the verses and traditions enforce a scrutiny of men, not only for sexual violence and extra-marital sex, but anything that tempts them to sexualise women, “And come not near to unlawful sex.” (al-Qur’ān, p. 17:32). Traditions even forbid “the lustful look,” and “licentious speech” (Saheeh Muslim, p. Hadith 2658) and all manners of sexualised conduct, even “unexpectedly looking,” (Saheeh Muslim, p. Hadith 5644) without blame upon women. It is noteworthy that confronted by mutual gazing, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ would physically correct the man without rebuking women (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. 1854).

Furthermore, Allāh described those men, who engage in sexual harassment and inappropriate gazing, as corrupted “hypocrites, and those in whose hearts is a disease” (al-Qur’ān, p. 33:60). The

Qur'ān offers them no sympathy, defence, justification for their behaviour, nor is it in anyway minimised or excused.

4.3.7 Discouraging Sexualisation

In one Ḥadīth, a man was strongly advised to look at women other than his wife asexually, comparable to a mother, daughter, or sister. As a result, “that young man never looked at anyone (sexually) after that.” (Tafseer al Quran al Atheem, p. 17:32) Under Islamic culture, women are offered their own dedicated spaces in every sphere of life, free from male intrusion. Allāh's messenger Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ said, "Beware of entering upon (a room for) the ladies." (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, p. Hadith 5232; Saheeh Muslim, p. Hadith 2172).

Furthermore, Islamic scripture prohibits sexually exploitative industries and sexualisation in the workplace. Tariq Al-Qarash narrated that,

... He forbade the employment of a slave-girl except what for she earned with her hands. He indicated (some things) with his fingers such as baking, spinning, and ginning. (Abu-Dawud, p. Hadith 3426)

Imam ibn Ḥajar explained that Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ also encouraged the increase of salaries or reduction of taxes for women to alleviate any pressure to “resort to earning from her private parts” out of poverty (al-Asqalani, 2001, p. 535).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Are young Muslim girls sexualized in the UK in the 21st Century?

Recent reports found that sexualization of girls, along with associated abuse and harassment in the UK was sadly rife in the state schooling system. Despite massive underreporting, 1.3% of all permanent exclusions from school were linked to sexual misconduct, with an average of over 2,100 additional suspensions per year. Girls far outnumbered boys in every victim measure (Department for Education, 2021).

Schoolgirls questioned about peer-on-peer harassment revealed that respondents were aware of frequent “sexist name-calling” (92%), sexual rumours (81%), unwanted sexual comments (80%), sexual assault (79%), unwanted touching (64%) and pressure to perform sexual acts (68%). Girls also complained of being groped in crowded school corridors. In the digital age, 88% of respondents reported awareness of girls regularly being pressured to send sexual images of themselves (80%) or receiving unwanted sexual images (88%) (Department for Education, 2021). Other research found that 71% of all women, of all ages, in the UK have suffered sexual harassment in a public place, with most women declining to report the matter to authorities (APPG for UN Women, 2021).

Responses from the survey conducted for this research also revealed a shocking reality of frequent sexual harassment among all women in every country interviewed, not just the UK. So, while there is no way to measure, from the above cited data, whether young Muslim girls suffer proportionately more or less sexualization or harassment, it is fair to assume that Muslim

schoolgirls, *Hijāb*-wearing or not, do not operate in an asexual vacuum, nor are they immune. However, does wearing the *Hijāb* increase or decrease sexualization for schoolgirls, thereby impacting on their quality of life?

5.2 Causes of Sexualisation

The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls published a report in 2007 addressing the causes and impact of sexualization on girls. Criticized for conflating studies on adults and children, a follow up study a decade later, drew upon fresher evidence and made note of age. Both reports focused on sexualization involving objectification, imposed sexuality, and reducing a girl's value to sexuality. The task force expended extensive efforts, time and resources investigating the causes of sexualization and possible preventions or interventions. It is unsurprising, but noteworthy, that the *Hijāb* was not identified as a cause – though other forms of clothing were highlighted as significant to sexualization (Zurbriggen, et al., 2007), as it will be explained below.

The studies found significant factors in modern media of all kinds, with 57% of adolescents drawing sexual knowledge from the media. In addition, studies revealed that adolescents spend 9 to 11 hours per day exposed to media, which it also found frequently sexualizes and objectifies women. 70% of television content was found to have sexual content, with 24 incidents of sexualizing content per programme. The study highlighted “wearing heavy makeup, ... high heels” and “revealing clothing,” as sexualizing content (Lamb & Koven, 2019, p. 2).

Movies, music videos and lyrics were also highlighted as a major factor in the sexualization of young girls. Objectifying and degrading women was a common trend in music videos, “including the display of more body parts, provocative dress,” advertising was found to exploit sex appeal portraying “suggestively dressed” women and “a prevalence of partial female nudity”. Children’s toys and Halloween costumes were examined finding “more than half of the female characters that were analysed wore revealing clothing.” In sports media, “Female athletes are shown wearing sexualized uniforms, such as skirts for tennis, short shorts, or bathing suits for volleyball...” (Lamb & Koven, 2019, pp. 3-4) The study found that 90% of teenage boys and the majority of teenage girls are exposed to freely available, explicit, pornography, 93% of which portrayed violence towards women (Lamb & Koven, 2019, p. 4). It is perhaps an obvious point, that nudity on-screen in pornography is a major sexualizing factor, impacting boys’ and girls’ perspectives on other girls and women off-screen.

5.3 Clothing and Sexualisation

While mention has been made of dress and clothing as evidence of sexualization throughout the study, girls’ clothing itself was specifically singled out by both studies as a massive sexualizing factor. Cited examples include sexualized imagery such as singers “dressed as a schoolgirl in pigtails, with her shirt unbuttoned”, children’s dolls dressed in “miniskirts, fishnet stockings”, and thongs marketed to seven-year-olds (Zurbruggen, et al., 2007). One study found 30% of preteen girls’ clothes on sale were sexualised, either by association, including

“red satin lingerie”, or due to emphasizing “a sexualized body part.” (Lamb & Koven, 2019, p. 4)

British non-Muslim schoolgirls also speak about the consequences of wearing shorts and crop tops, exposing flesh and dressing provocatively, drawing an intuitive link between the amount of flesh displayed and the appropriateness and sexualizing consequences, they described a crop top and shorts as inappropriate because “it catches more attention, like it is more eye catching for a boy to see...” (Ringrose, Tolman, & Ragonese, 2019, pp. 20-21) It would be prudent to point out that the Islamic dress, as detailed in this research, clearly counters each of the causes of sexualisation raised by the APA report, and its successor studies. By covering, not revealing flesh, and de-emphasizing sexualized body parts with loose clothing, and prohibiting soft and hardcore pornography altogether, Islamic values clearly seeks to massively reduce the sexualisation of girls in society, arguably very successfully.

5.4 Are Muslim Girls Sexualised Less?

It is important to note that little demographic data exists in any of the above cited studies to measure the level of sexualisation experienced by girls observing *Hijāb* in comparison to other groups. However, an indirect inference can be drawn from census data and research into underaged conception rates in the UK. Heap et al. (2020) analysed conception data for children under the age of 18 in discussion about the recorded decline in conception rate between 1998 and 2017. While many factors have been credited with the decline, including educational aspirations and sex education, a significant factor highlighted points to the change in demographics, with an increase in

second generation Black, Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi children, particularly in London (Heap, Berrington, & Ingham, 2020).

UK Census data confirms that the religious makeup of the increased ethnic groups cited are significantly Muslim. 91% of Pakistanis, 90% of Bangladeshis, 14% of Indian, 15% of all Black and 5% of all mixed heritage inhabitants of the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2015). Curiously, while these minorities make up less than 15% of the entire UK population, it is astounding that the conduct of these minorities could have such a profound impact on average conception rates across the entire country. There would naturally need to be a significant difference between sexualisation in these communities compared with others for this to be true.

While the conception data focused on ethnicity and did not directly differentiate by religion, “ethnicity may act as a proxy for religion;” (Heap, Berrington, & Ingham, 2020, p. 8) and Muslim heavy ethnicities, such as South Asians, tended to become sexually active later than their peers, Heap et al. (2020) writes, “teenage Muslim or Hindu women are less likely to have had intercourse by age 18 than their Christian or non-religious counterparts” (Heap, Berrington, & Ingham, 2020, p. 8). This is a significant consideration of the serious implications of Miss Spielman’s anti-*Hijāb* rhetoric.

Considering the common theme among respondents to the *Hijāb* survey conducted for this paper, and the diverse body of supporting research cited above, there is a strong suggestion that *Hijāb* wearing girls are less sexualised and suffer noticeably less sexual harassment from peers and strangers than other

girls, and it is fair to conclude that girls less likely to engage in sexual intercourse before adulthood suffer less sexualisation in general, than their more sexually active counterparts.

While it may fly in the face of modern feminist thinking, perhaps simple passive solutions such as the *Hijāb* are real viable options in combating the alarming rate of sexual harassment and abuse in schools, especially given the strong reticence of girls to report incidents to staff. As alien as it might seem to the UK, the addition of a *Hijāb* to compulsory school uniforms, as well as associated Islamic values such as gender separation, and teaching the lowering of the gaze and pre-marital abstinence could genuinely reduce the sexual harassment suffered by girls growing up in the UK, and preserve the dignity, innocence, and quality of life of girls of all religions in UK schools

6. CONCLUSION

Despite abundant data on sexualisation in UK schools and linking revealing clothing with sexualisation, Amanda Spielman's insinuations that young girls wearing *Hijāb* is evidence of sexualisation does not appear to be based on any reliable research. Available data on sexualisation rarely tracks religion or *Hijāb*-wearing habits. UK Muslim girls, in general, debut into sexual activity at a later age than Christian or non-religious counterparts. *Hijāb*-wearing girls have consistently cited the *Hijāb* as a protective and empowering factor that mitigates sexualisation and reduces sexual harassment from peers and strangers. This is corroborated by primary data from a survey conducted for this paper.

Islamic scriptures on the topic of sexualisation consistently condemn the sexualisation, harassment, exploitation and abuse of women and take far reaching steps to obstruct such misogyny in society. Holding men accountable for their behaviour and deterring misogyny with robust punishments in this life and in the spiritual afterlife, it is clear from all readings, orthodox and contemporary, that the *Hijāb* was legislated for the protection of women from uncouth men with “diseases in their hearts”. From all accounts, it appears that these aims are effectively achieved by wearers of the *Hijāb*, despite complaining of islamophobia and prejudice as a side effect. However, there does appear to be an alarming rise of young men sexualising *Hijāb* wearing women in recent generations, as they might seek to marry a practising Muslim woman or due to popularisation in social media.

Other evidence of sexualising the *Hijāb* exists predominantly among non-Muslims who had fetishized the screened Muslim women during colonial Europe, with travellers fantasizing about the goings on in the hidden rooms of Turkish Harems, forbidden to men. Imagined scenes were portrayed in paintings, stories and recreated photographs giving a misinformed impression of Harem life. Such propaganda was refuted by female travellers who, having gained access, wrote about an empowered class of wealthy and financially independent women, far removed from the prevailing European tales. It is unlikely that this would be relevant to Muslim parents choosing to dress their children with the *Hijāb*.

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