

School inspectors to quiz girls in hijabs

From the [*Mail on Sunday*](#)

Muslim girls wearing the hijab in primary school will be asked why by inspectors. The reason they give will then be written in schools reports amid fears girls are being forced by their parents.

The chief inspector of schools, Amanda Spielman, announced the move today. She wants to make sure schools are not breaching equality laws by requiring only girls to wear religious garments. 'In seeking to address these concerns, inspectors will talk to girls who wear such garments to ascertain why they do so in the school,' said Spielman.

Spielman says ... that primary school hijabs could be seen to be sexualising children because the headscarf is traditionally worn as a sign of modesty in front of men when Muslim girls reach puberty.

Spielman asked to meet the campaigners after a Sunday Times survey revealed that nearly a fifth (18%) of 800 state primary schools, in 11 regions of England list the hijab as part of their uniform policy, mostly as an optional item.

One of the country's top state primary schools revealed it had banned the hijab for girls under eight last autumn, despite protests by parents, and intends to ban it for girls under 11 from next September.

Neena Lall, head teacher of St Stephen's School in Upton Park, east London, where most pupils are of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage, said children aged three to five were turning up at nursery wearing the hijab. "There is no requirement for girls to wear the hijab until puberty. It is

not appropriate in a primary school," she said.

Toby Howarth, the bishop of Bradford, a city where some Church of England primary schools permit the hijab, said: "Banning the hijab would be counter-productive in Bradford. It would be telling parents we know better than them what their children should wear."

Amina Lone, a former Labour parliamentary candidate and one of the activists who met the chief inspector, said: "Covering of young girls is often the first sign of young people being treated unequally. This often leads to girls being pulled out of swimming lessons, dance classes or other creative lessons."

Aisha Ali-Khan, a Muslim feminist campaigner and a teacher for 13 years, told MailOnline: 'The hijab should be banned from primary schools but local authorities are afraid of causing offence to the Muslim community and afraid of being branded as racist.

'A headscarf or hijab, is usually worn by girls who have reached puberty, to prevent unwanted sexual advances from men. How can a four or five year old child make an informed choice? It's not allowed in Islam so why is it being allowed in schools? You should only do something if you want to and understand the concept behind it. But the local authorities are too scared to go back and our government has allowed this to be part of the school policy and that's wrong. They are allowing decisions to be made by schools and local authorities which is worrying and they are trying to wash their hands of all responsibility.'

Gina Khan, a children's rights campaigner in Birmingham, added: 'Schools are allowing it because they are afraid of being called Islamophobic and they have been told that this is a religious garment – but they need to support Muslim girls to have free choices, not to be set apart from other children.'

The Department for Education refused to comment but indicated

that it was up to schools to set their own uniform policies.