

'Tone deaf' Home Office celebrates World Hijab Day

Home Office staff were invited to celebrate "World Hijab Day" despite asylum guidance which says being forced to adhere to religious dress codes is "persecution".

Under Home Office guidelines, women can claim asylum on a case-by-case basis based on religious persecution if they are forced into "compliance with religious codes or dress". The rules also state that for women who have faced the threat of violence "if they failed to observe those [dress code] traditions and state protection was unavailable... refugee status would be appropriate".

The email was sent by the Home Office's Islamic Network (HOIN), a voluntary group for Muslim civil servants in the department, and described the hijab as being "brought to women as a way of protection". *Protection from whom? Not Englishmen.*

The memo posed a series of questions about the hijab, including: "Do Muslim men make women wear the hijab?" The answer was: "No, many Muslim women choose to wear the hijab for various reasons, and mainly to grow closer to their faith and Allah."

One whistleblower, *writing below for The Telegraph*, who received the email said: "I deal with cases of women claiming they cannot go back to Iran otherwise they will be forced into wearing the hijab...The Home Office's promotion of the hijab is tone deaf and completely ignores the many women who face violence if they refuse to wear the item."

The departmental email included five quotes from Home Office staff with positive stories around wearing the hijab, before stating the "Hoin understands that not all experiences have

been positive”.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born former Dutch politician who says she requires security protection because of her criticism of Islam . . . raised questions about the Home Office Islamic Network, saying: “It is deeply concerning that there is a group of Islamist activists in the Home Office to begin with. There are more and more cases of women who are fleeing from Islamist regimes, and who may not feel comfortable telling their story honestly if they are faced with bureaucrats who have their own political agenda on Islam.”

Posing the question, “Why do some Muslim women wear a Hijab and others don’t?” The network answered: “It’s a personal choice and being a Muslim means constantly striving to strengthen your faith (Iman). Different women are at different stages of their spiritual journey.”

Maryam Namazie, a British-Iranian human rights activist, said the internal message was disconcerting, promoting Islamic rather than civic values. She said: “Would the Home Office allow a group of white civil servants to promote racial segregation as an exercise in ‘inclusivity’? Yet it is perfectly comfortable with a group advocating the hijab and veiling of women. . . .”

HOIN’s email concludes that Home Office staff can “offer support” by conducting “workshops or training sessions to raise awareness about the hijab, its significance, and dispel misconceptions”, “foster an open and respectful workplace culture where employees feel comfortable discussing their needs” and create “an inclusive and respectful environment” through safe spaces.

The Home Office and the Islamic Network were approached for comment.

‘My department is failing in its first priority, to protect the British public’

By an anonymous civil servant

I work in the Home Office deciding whether to grant people asylum, and I am terrified that one day one of my cases will end up on the news.

For me, the case of [Abdul Shokoor Ezedi](#), the twice rejected asylum seeker who is suspected of committing an atrocious acid attack on a mother and two young girls, was the final straw. I cannot sit idly by while I watch our broken asylum system fail again and again.

There has been no internal communication about the recent acid attack case. Nothing. Not even an email telling us that they are looking into how it could have been allowed to happen.

Instead we are bombarded with emails that celebrate things like "World Hijab Day" at the same time as I deal with cases of women claiming they cannot go back to Iran otherwise they will be forced into wearing these items.

The whole culture is rotten and I don't actually think half of the senior civil service have the strength, or will, to be tough on asylum. I went to one speech where the head of asylum, who has now left, openly said she disagreed with the Government's policies.

My colleagues and I all know that most of these cases are not legitimate, but our hands are tied. I estimate that around one in four cases I decide on are genuine.

Not every asylum seeker starts off knowing how to game the system, however, it has become clear to me that word spreads and trends emerge regarding how to game their applications.

Asylum seekers will be coached, often by legal representatives or through friends and family (some of whom may have been granted asylum in the past), to concoct a reason they might be persecuted in their home country.

They “convert” to Christianity, often coming with evidence of recent baptisms, or say they are gay and take pictures in gay nightclubs to prove it (some of these photos look as though they are very uncomfortable being there). In one instance a male claimed that he was gay, only to drop the assertion halfway through his asylum interview because he felt so disgusted by the idea.

In one interview the claimant insisted that he was being persecuted in his home country due to his political beliefs. I asked him to name the leader of his nation’s opposition party and he couldn’t answer. He asked for a break and came back ten minutes later knowing everything about the political situation.

This job is incredibly stressful and I worry that people’s safety is being put at risk. Some applicants will arrive with criminal convictions, including sexual offences, but this does not automatically disbar them from entry.

The Home Office provides endless groups for staff well-being with lots of diversity organisations and so on. But, I could never picture myself going to my manager with my concerns. I don’t think I’m a coward, but I know it will end badly if I say something.

There are a few people I have worked with who are on the same page, but we all know that our promotion chances would be dead in the water if we brought up anything “non PC”.

The [Home Office is hostile](#) to those who speak up internally, unless their complaint is about diversity or discrimination or some other civil service obsession.

Home Office directives and pressure to clear the backlog of asylum cases has caused caseworkers to cut corners. The default is now to err on the side of accepting people. For example, we have been told to cut down the time it takes to conduct asylum interviews, which has led to confusion and a

lack of clarity over some cases.

Even as someone who is sceptical of many applications, internal targets and incentives mean that I feel under huge pressure to accept people. It takes less than half an hour to accept a case, while it takes around a day to write up a report to reject someone (this is because you have to lay out the evidence as to why you rejected it for legal reasons, which is a timely process).

The top brass have told us to be on the lookout for applications (even citing a string of recent cases), that use the same wording, or similar stories, and are often submitted by people using the same immigration lawyer. We know that many law firms tell applicants to submit the same hokum that has been proven to work previously but we have not been told to stop granting asylum in these cases.

The Home Office ethos and "values" are all around safeguarding asylum seekers and protecting their welfare. My department is failing in its first mission and priority, to protect the British public.

A Home Office spokesperson said: "The Home Office treats its staff equally and fairly. It is a place where staff can be themselves at work and share their experiences.

"We do not recognise these claims on the processing of asylum claims. There are thorough processes in place to ensure all claims are decided without bias, and any staff with concerns should raise them through departmental processes."