PRESS RELEASE – Landmark Report Reveals Counterproductive Prevent Strategy Violates Rights of Children

The government’s Prevent strategy, a centrepiece of its national counter-terrorism policy, is stifling the freedoms of children in classrooms across the United Kingdom and is counter-productive, Rights Watch (UK) said today in a landmark report based on extensive interviews with children, parents, teachers and law enforcement officials, among others.

The report 'Preventing Education: Human Rights and UK Counter-Terrorism Policy in Schools', is the most comprehensive study of the Prevent strategy following the introduction of the statutory Prevent duty on schools on 1 July 2015. The report brings to light a number of case studies never before reported and uncovers a range of human rights violations perpetrated against children in the United Kingdom in the name of national security. It comes only weeks after the Government announced further controversial counter-extremism measures in the Queens Speech.

“At a time when effective and lawful counter-terrorism policies are more important than ever, the UK government’s Prevent strategy is instead leaving a generation of young Britons fearful of exercising their rights to freedom of expression and belief. It is also proving counter-productive, driving children to discuss issues related to terrorism, religion, and identity outside the classroom and online where simplistic narratives are promoted and go unchallenged,” director of Rights Watch (UK) Yasmine Ahmed said.

The Prevent strategy puts a statutory duty on a vast array of public sector workers in the United Kingdom, including teachers and childcare providers, to report individuals including children considered at risk of being drawn into terrorism based on their perceived association with non-violent extremism. Yet this obligation is based on a vague definition of extremism that includes opposition to ‘British values’, and a set of prescribed indicators of vulnerability to extremism that include ‘a desire for status’ and ‘a need for identity meaning and belonging’.

Rights Watch (UK)’s report reveals that the Prevent strategy is serving to clamp down on open expression and debate in classrooms particularly among Muslim children who are disproportionately impacted by Prevent and fear being reported for expressing their political and religious views.

“Our research has found that Muslim children across the United Kingdom are self-censoring for fear of being reported under Prevent. Their fear is not unwarranted. We have uncovered a number of instances were children have been referred to Prevent for legitimately exercising their right to freedom of expression in situations where they pose no threat to society whatsoever.
This is having a chilling effect on free speech among Muslim children in the United Kingdom and a very serious and detrimental impact on their right to education." Yasmine Ahmed said.

The report reveals that children are being referred to Prevent on the basis of arbitrary decisions by teachers and other education professionals who receive inadequate training and guidance but are anxious to be seen to be complying with the statutory duty.

Rights Watch (UK)’s research documents a 9-year-old boy who was interviewed, without a parent or guardian present, and ‘cautioned’ for wearing a t-shirt with Arabic writing on it. Since the incident, the child is reluctant to return to school and is experiencing stress related health problems. The report also highlights the case of a 16-year-old student with learning disabilities who was referred to Prevent for borrowing a book on terrorism from the school library, and a 17-year-old boy who was questioned by police officers about his political and religious views after he was referred to Prevent for expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people.

In addition to the impact on freedom of expression and the right to education, the report also documents how the Government’s counter-extremism strategy is infringing on the right to privacy of children in the United Kingdom. There is evidence that under Prevent, information on children is being collected and retained without their consent and with no apparent regulation and safeguards. In one case, a 17 year old who was referred to Prevent discovered the police had collected information on him without his or his parent’s knowledge or consent, and was told that this information would be held indefinitely by the police and may be used against him in the future.

“It is completely unacceptable that the Government is collecting, retaining and potentially sharing information on children in the United Kingdom without their consent and with no apparent regulation and oversight, particularly in instances where these children are not even accused or suspected of engaging in unlawful activity.

This is a clear violation of the right to privacy and is a flagrant violation of the state’s obligation to ensure that all its decisions and actions take account of the best interests of the child as a primary consideration.” states Yasmine Ahmed.

In direct violation of the UK’s legal obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the report also exposes the complete lack of consideration by the Government and Parliament of the impact of the Prevent strategy on children. When the Prevent duty was introduced into Parliament in 2015 there was no consideration of whether Prevent had the potential to have a differential impact in the rights of Muslim children and no acknowledgment the strategy may impact children's human rights, particularly their rights to freedom of expression, education and freedom of religion.

“It is time for the UK Government to acknowledge that the Prevent strategy is infringing the human rights of children across the United Kingdom and is counter-productive.

Children should be encouraged to learn and grow, to express their views and have them challenged, and to value the fundamental rights that allow them to do so.
strategy that undermines these rights and alienates vulnerable children is counter-productive and inconsistent with the very ‘British values’ that the Government is supposedly promoting.

It is time for the Prevent strategy to be abolished.”

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