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Iceland's mooted circumcision ban sparks religious outrage

Religious groups have condemned a bill in Iceland's parliament that would ban circumcision for non-medical reasons

BBC News (19.02.2018) - <http://bbc.in/2sBv2WB> - The draft law would impose a six-year prison term on anyone guilty of "removing part or all of the [child's] sexual organs", arguing the practice violates the child's rights.

Jewish and Muslim leaders however have called the bill an attack on religious freedom.

Iceland would be the first European country to ban the procedure.

The country is thought to have roughly 250 Jewish citizens and around 1,500 Muslim citizens.

Why is the bill being introduced?

MP Silja Dögg Gunnarsdóttir of the Progressive Party, who introduced the bill at the start of the month, said: "We are talking about children's rights, not about freedom of belief.

"Everyone has the right to believe in what they want, but the rights of children come above the right to believe."

Iceland passed a law in 2005 banning female genital mutilation, and supporters of this move have compared it to that law.

The latest bill (in Icelandic) says circumcision "involves permanent interventions in a child's body that can cause severe pain".

If it passes its first reading, the draft law will go to a committee stage before it can come into effect.

What do religious groups say?

The Nordic Jewish Communities issued a statement condemning the ban on "the most central rite" in their faith.

"You are about to attack Judaism in a way that concerns Jews all over the world," the open letter reads.

Jewish campaign group Milah UK stated that comparisons with female genital mutilation are unwarranted, given that in the case of male circumcision there is "no recognised long-term negative impact on the child".

Imam Ahmad Seddeeq at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Iceland also criticised the move.

"It's... part of our faith," he said." It's something that touches our religion and I believe that this is... a contravention [of] religious freedom."

The Bishop of Reykjavik, Agnes M. Sigurðardóttir, warned Jewish and Muslim people could feel "unwelcome" in Iceland.

"The danger that arises, if this bill becomes law, is that Judaism and Islam will become criminalised religions," she said. "We must avoid all such forms of extremism."

Is circumcision safe?

By Michelle Roberts, BBC News Online health editor

BBC News (19.02.2018) - Although it is a relatively simple medical procedure, circumcision is not entirely risk free.

Doctors may recommend that a man or boy is circumcised if he has an unusually tight foreskin, known as phimosis, or suffers from recurrent infections of the foreskin and penis, known as balanitis.

There is also some evidence that men who are circumcised have a lower risk of contracting HIV from HIV-positive female partners.

It is not clear if circumcision reduces the risk of other sexually transmitted infections too, but studies suggest it may lower the chance of catching genital warts caused by a family of viruses called HPV.

The main risks of the surgery are bleeding and infection.

In the UK, the chance of these occurring is between one in 10 and one in 50.

How do other countries compare?

Circumcision is legal throughout Europe, although the practice is becoming more controversial.

A court in Germany passed a local ban in 2012 after the circumcision of a four-year-old Muslim boy led to complications, with the judge saying it "permanently and irreparably changed" the body.

However, the German government later that year clarified the act is legal provided it is performed by trained practitioners.

The following year, the Council of Europe recommended countries take steps to ensure good medical and sanitary practices when performing a circumcision.

And in the UK in 2016, a court ruled that a Muslim father could not have his sons circumcised after their mother disagreed.

Cardinal Marx: Bill banning circumcision in Iceland a threat to religious freedom

Catholic News Agency (08.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2GZeDOU> - A new bill proposed in Iceland that would make circumcision punishable by up to six years in prison is a "dangerous attack" on religious freedom, Cardinal Reinhard Marx has said.

"Protecting the health of children is a legitimate goal of every society, but in this case this concern is instrumentalized, without any scientific basis, to stigmatise certain religious communities. This is extremely worrying," Marx said in a statement.

Marx commented on the issue as President of the Catholic Church in the European Union (COMECE). While Iceland does not belong to the European Union, it does have "privileged relations" with EU countries, COMECE noted.

"COMECE considers any attempt on the fundamental right to freedom of religion as unacceptable. The criminalisation of circumcision is a very grave measure that raises deep concern," Marx added.

Circumcision is a religious ritual for many, notably Jews and Muslims. Jews typically circumcise infant boys eight days after birth, while Muslim practices vary widely.

The proposed bill states that "Anyone who...causes damage to the body or health of a child or a woman by...removing sexual organs shall be imprisoned for up to 6 years."

The bill specifically states that circumcisions on boys, if performed for non-medical reasons, would be banned in Iceland under the bill. Female circumcision has been banned in Iceland since 2005.

Male circumcisions used to be "generally encouraged...to prevent various disorders and behaviors," the bill states.

"In recent years, this view has been expanding, and is quite widespread in Europe, that the execution of a construction for a purpose other than a medical is a violation of human rights boys because of irreversible interventions in their bodies," it states, and carries a risk of infection.

The bill also states that circumcision of young boys violates "Article 12. UN Convention on the Rights of Children to Affect Your Own Life" as well as "paragraph 3. Article 24 which guarantees children protection against traditions that are harmful to children's health."

While the bill does not define at what age childhood ends, the age of sexual consent in Iceland is 15 years of age.

According to Mayo Clinic, circumcision may have some health benefits, including easier hygiene, decreased risk of urinary tract infections, decreased risk of sexually transmitted infections, and a decreased risk of penile cancer.

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that the benefits of circumcision outweigh the risks, although they encourage parental discretion in the decision.

The health risks and benefits have been a topic of debate for several years in some European countries, although none have banned the practice outright.

Iceland, which has a population of around 334,000, has a small Muslim population of a few hundred people, and an even smaller Jewish population of around 100 people.

While Iceland has no designated Rabbi, Jewish news source ynetnews.com reports that Chief Rabbi of Denmark Yair Melchior and the Rabbi of Oslo, Yoav Melchior are campaigning against the bill on behalf of the Jewish population in Iceland.

"Iceland does not have a significant Jewish or Muslim population; therefore there are hardly any opponents to the bill. Only considerable international pressure can help," the Rabbis told ynetnews.

"There is no country in the world now that bans circumcision. This sets a dangerous precedent that may affect other countries; the Danish parliament is now considering such a bill as well," they added. The Danish Medical Association has advised against male circumcision in boys for several years, though no ban has been enacted in the country.

The European Conference of Rabbis also voiced their opposition to the bill in a statement, as reported in ynetnews.

"Circumcision is a critical part of Jewish life and no authority in the world can forbid Jews from carrying out this commandment," they said.

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the group, added that "although the Icelandic Jewish community is small, we cannot ignore the dangerous precedent that this law can set and the consequences that such legislation can cause in other countries."

"We call on lawmakers to immediately rescind this miserable piece of legislation and continue supporting Jewish life without limits."

It is unclear when the bill would be up for a vote.
