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# **Hijab ban proposal sparks debate, protests in Denmark**

***A new recommendation to ban Muslim headscarves in Danish elementary schools has been met with a backlash in Denmark.***

By Anna Gudmann Hansen

Al Jazeera (12.09.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3ddpOIG> - The Danish Commission for the Forgotten Women's Struggle – a body set up by Denmark's ruling Social Democratic Party – has [recommended](#) that the country's government ban hijabs (Muslim headscarves) for students in Danish elementary schools.

The August 24 proposal is one of nine recommendations with the stated aim of preventing "honour-related social control" of girls from minority backgrounds. The other recommendations propose providing Danish language courses, promoting modern child upbringing practices in ethnic minority families, and strengthening sexual education in elementary schools.

Huda Makai Asghar, 15, would be forced to take off her headscarf if the ban is implemented. The ninth grader at the Kokkedal Skole – a school outside of the Danish capital, Copenhagen, with close to 800 students – has been wearing the hijab for two years.

"I have always known that we have freedom of religion in Denmark. I can wear what I want, and I can believe in what I like. So when I heard about the proposal, I was surprised," she told Al Jazeera on the phone.

Asghar feels the idea of a ban violates her freedom, and that of girls like her, and that it is wrong to force her to take the headscarf off.

"I can't do that; it is a part of me," she said.

The ban proposal has sparked a backlash in Denmark.

Iram Khawaja, an associate professor at the Danish School of Education at Aarhus University, has been outspoken against the proposal.

Her research focuses on how children from religious and ethnic minorities navigate Danish society, and she is co-founder of the Professional Psychology Network Against Discrimination.

According to Khawaja, a ban will not solve any of the issues faced by girls who are subject to social control.

“On the contrary, a ban can add to bigger issues. The girls who are already being exposed to negative social control will be put under increasing pressure,” she told Al Jazeera.

“It is problematic to equate wearing the hijab with negative social control – there are also girls who do not wear the hijab who are exposed to negative social control,” Khawaja added.

According to the commission’s report ([PDF](#)), the “use of scarves in elementary school can create a division between children in two groups – ‘us’ and ‘them’”.

The study was conducted by the research companies Als Research and Epinion on behalf of the Danish Ministry of Education. It is based on a survey of 1,441 students in sixth to eighth grades from 19 elementary schools and eight independent and private schools, as well as 22 interviews with students and 17 interviews with teachers.

According to Khawaja, a study from 2018 on the extent of negative social control showed that few Danish school children – 8 percent of the participants in the study – are actually exposed to social control.

“The majority of girls wearing the hijab are doing it of their own free will,” Khawaja said.

According to her, simply making the recommendation and the debate that will follow could have negative consequences.

“It will, of course, have consequences if the ban is put into action, but I believe there are already negative outcomes now. Simply putting the proposal out there is already stigmatising, problematising, and casting suspicion on a large group of religious minorities,” she said.

“Although the intentions are good, it ends up stigmatising and disempowering the ones you are trying to help.”

Lone Jørgensen, principal of Tilst Skole, an elementary school in Jutland with approximately 700 students, does not support the recommended ban, either.

“The ban would create a law between the children and their parents, and the children would get stuck in between,” Jørgensen told Al Jazeera.

“My job is to run a good school for everyone, where there is room for everyone and everyone is of equal value.”

### **‘Part of Denmark’**

On August 26, several thousand people took to the streets of Copenhagen to protest the ban proposal.

According to the Danish newspapers [Arbejderen](#) and [B.T.](#), several thousand took to the streets.

Midwife and activist Lamia Ibnhsain, 37, organised the event, titled “Hands off our hijabs”.

"I realised that our voices are invisible in society. The initial intention with the demonstration was to go to the streets and make our voices heard," she told Al Jazeera.

Ibnhsain said she has had "a lot of difficult feelings" following the ban proposal.

She has felt "othered", placed under suspicion as a mother, and she fears a ban might add to some girls feeling "wrong" compared to others.

"Muslim women wearing the hijab are everywhere in Danish society. They are doctors, psychologists, bus drivers, and artists. They are a part of Denmark," she said.

Ibnhsain is a mother to two girls – an eight-year-old and a 16-year-old.

Her older daughter wears the hijab, while the youngest wears it on days when she feels like it.

Ibnhsain explains how talking to her girls about a possible ban has been tough.

"My girls are wearing the hijab with joy and happiness. The hijab is a matter of the heart, and it should under no circumstances be turned into a political discussion," she said. "It violates my girls' basic rights."

### **The commission**

The commission was set up by the current ruling party, the Social Democratic Party, in January.

Although it presented the recommendations unanimously on August 24, two members of the commission later on retracted their support for a hijab ban following the debate, which led to one of them withdrawing completely from the commission, stating that she could not support the proposal of a ban.

In a written response to the criticism of the study presented to the commission in an email, the secretariat behind the commission told Al Jazeera it had been set up by the government and its mission was to present recommendations on how to ensure that all women from a minority background could enjoy the same rights and freedoms as other Danish women.

"The commission focuses on how Danish society can reinforce the efforts against honour-related social control, which we know from research is a problem in certain environments in Denmark," it said in an email response.

"The study from 2018, which is referred to, states that only 43 percent of the ethnic minority girls in the study are allowed to see male friends in their spare time, while the same is the case for 88 percent of the ethnic Danish girls," the statement read.

"And 13 percent of ethnic minority girls are afraid that their families will plan their future against their will, while the same is the case for 5 percent of the ethnic majority girls. One of the aims of the commission is to bring recommendations on how to equalise differences like these between Danes who are ethnic minorities and majorities," it added.

The secretariat said the commission consisted of nine members with different backgrounds and knowledge – "they are people with practical experience, research backgrounds, and people who have experienced these issues personally. All know about the challenges related to countering honour-related social control".

The commission is set to make additional recommendations in the coming months.

*Photo: On August 26, people took to the streets to protest a proposed hijab ban in Danish elementary schools [Courtesy of Lamia Ibnhsain]*

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