

## **Hearing on circumcision of boys in the Danish parliament**

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On 22 October 2014, a hearing was held in the Danish Parliament, "Circumcision of boys - what are the rights? Uncovering arguments for and against circumcision of boys in Denmark." The Parliamentary Cross-Political Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights had invited the hearing, in collaboration with the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee.

It was an interesting afternoon, but also one of the most bizarre events I have ever experienced. It quickly became apparent, both during the invited presentations and in the discussion afterwards, that it is simply not possible to argue rationally for maintaining the right to ritual circumcision of little boys, but that did not stop several of the presenters from making the attempt.

A Jewish doctor, Henri Goldstein, and a Muslim doctor, Kamran Shah, agreed that circumcision was a very important part of their community. Others pointed out that it is a strange entry ticket to a community that you must cut something off yourself to join.

Goldstein mentioned that 5-10% of Jews are not circumcised. I have a hard time imagining these 5-10% being rejected from the community and how would excluding them be controlled? I cannot imagine either that Jews have protocols about who is circumcised and who is not, or that, if you are a Jewish man and show up at a party or at the synagogue, there is a doorman asking you to pull down your pants to ascertain whether you are entitled to participate in the community.

### **A Jewish mom regrets circumcising her son**

Leo Milgrom, a circumcised Danish Jew, gave a convincing account. When he was born, he was part of a community in the small family, but after he had been circumcised, he did not feel he belonged to this community. Many years passed before his mother admitted that circumcising him had been a mistake.

Milgrom mentioned that some Jews no longer circumcise their boys but use another form of ritual that does not harm them, e.g. by giving the infant's foreskin a small prick instead. Goldstein countered that very few Jews use a ritual of this nature. This was beside the point. In my opinion, the great majority of Jews should learn from the small minority who think more about the welfare of the child.

It was also mentioned that religion is man-made, and that Christianity has changed the perception of many things during history, so why shouldn't Judaism and Islam similarly change the perception of something that is highly inappropriate?

### **Must Muslims be circumcised?**

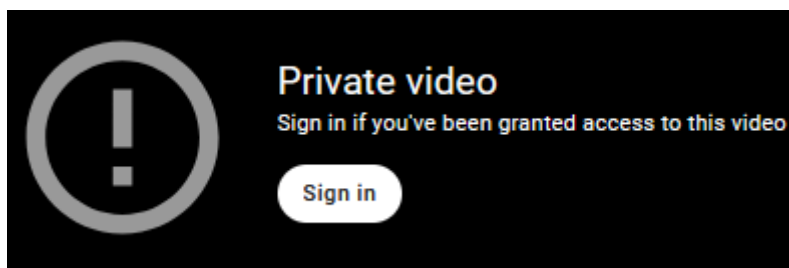
Kamran Shah, who, in addition to being a doctor, is also an imam and a representative of the Danish Muslim Union, sharply distanced himself from the idea of changing attitudes and stated that there are virtually no Muslims who are not circumcised.

Shah argued that if circumcision is banned, we will see illegal "backyard circumcisions" under conditions that carry far greater health risks than if it is done openly. That argument does not hold. We have heard the same argument in relation to female circumcision (known in most of the world as female genital

mutilation), but that has not stopped us from banning the practice. Furthermore, it has apparently not led to an increase in the illegal, and riskier, circumcision of little girls.

Shah appeared nice and friendly, but he seems to me to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. He has, for example, explained that it is "haram" (sinful, i.e. forbidden by Allah) for good Muslim sisters to train to become social and health assistants, nurses, or medical laboratory technicians, because in these professions you come into physical contact with other people.

Shah's discriminatory attitude to women was documented in a YouTube video that was freely available in 2014: <http://youtu.be/YJVv2kt2U60>. It might have been too embarrassing for himself or his community, as what is shown today is this:



Shah preferred that women train as schoolteachers, so that there could be a lot of Muslim schools, which could counter the brainwashing that he believed was taking place in Danish schools. I believe a more worthy representative of Danish Muslims could have been found for the hearing than this extreme imam.

### **Not a health-promoting measure**

Else Smith, Director of the National Board of Health, reviewed some of the medical evidence for circumcision and concluded that the National Board of Health could not, based on existing evidence, recommend circumcision as a health-promoting measure. She added that the National Board of Health, on the other hand, also saw no reason to advise *against* circumcision because the board believed that the risks were very small.

This was countered by chief physician and researcher in sexual health, Dr. Morten Frisch, who mentioned that the National Board of Health's note on circumcision from 2013 was full of embarrassing errors, inaccuracies, trivialisations, and serious omissions that largely gave way to religious groups' views on the matter. Frisch pointed out that there are indeed children who die from circumcision and that there are quite a few others who suffer serious operative complications. Frisch referred to a report from Righospitalet, which showed that 5% of the children who had undergone ritual circumcision had had significant complications from the procedure.

Smith countered that the material also included circumcisions on medical indication and that the complication rate therefore cannot be compared with the more favorable complication rates from abroad. But this is not correct; it was only about ritual circumcisions.

Smith further claimed that there have never been serious complications from ritual circumcision in Denmark. This is also incorrect. The National Board of Health was aware of a case where an infant boy ended up in a coma at Hvidovre Hospital after a [botched circumcision](#) performed by a doctor at a private clinic in May 2014. This is apparent in a ministerial reply to the Danish Parliament's Health and Prevention Committee from 2 June 2014:

*The National Board of Health has stated the following: "The National Board of Health knows that the Medical Officers have been contacted by a hospital with information that a boy has been admitted to the hospital with complications after anaesthesia in connection with circumcision. The National Board of Health is investigating whether there is reason to start an audit."*

### **An ancient ritual, nothing else**

Frisch also discussed the harmful effects of circumcision on sex life. Shah, on the other hand, strongly argued for the justification of circumcision due to the "fantastic evidence" there was for the many medical benefits. But there is precisely no such thing, and it is not what the case is about at all. Jews and Muslims did not introduce circumcision to prevent disease; it is an ancient ritual, and nothing else.

Philosopher Klemens Kappel, former member of the Council of Ethics, delivered the strangest argument of the day. Kappel argued that it could be okay for parents to inflict suffering on their children if the purpose is to strengthen a community.

Kappel's argumentation can be used to legitimize the circumcision of girls, and it also fits very badly with the fact that we have abolished the right to discipline our children physically. It is infinitely worse to remove the foreskin of a little boy than to slap him in the face.

Type Trier, a lawyer and expert in human rights, including children's rights, advocated that the child himself should have an influence on the decision about circumcision, but he argued that the child was able to see the consequences of such a decision already from 7 years of age. His contention, however, contradicts what we know about children. Children that young will be highly influenced by what their parents think.

Moreover, tattooing is illegal in Denmark before the child is 18 years old, which is why circumcision should also be banned until the children reach adulthood and can make their own decisions. Danish doctors and [80-90% of the population](#) believe that non-medical circumcision of children under 18 should be illegal. Unlike tattooing, which can be removed to some extent, circumcision is an irreversible intervention, so also for this reason, it is far worse than tattooing.

### **We cannot justify banning female circumcision while allowing male circumcision**

Another interesting thing that Frisch pointed out was that the mildest form of circumcision of girls is anatomically quite similar to circumcision of boys, and it is of course inconsistent that we have banned one but not the other.

In ethics, we are obliged to demonstrate that there is a relevant, principled difference between two situations if we believe that something is permissible in one situation but not in the other. So, also for this reason, the argument for maintaining the right to male circumcision falls apart.

Joachim B. Olsen from the political party Liberal Alliance stated that there are examples of female circumcision being abandoned in some cultures, and he would therefore like to know whether this - due to the much mentioned importance of circumcision for the community - had had the effect that the culture in question had collapsed. Shah was asked to reply. He spoke for a very long time but avoided answering the question. This led Mette Gjernskov, chairwoman of the Cross-Political Network and deputy chairwoman of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, to draw her own conclusion, which was that Shah had (at least indirectly) acknowledged that this had not happened in Muslim religious communities in Denmark. This led to shouts from the audience, which clearly revolved around the view that Gjernskov could not allow

herself to conclude this way. She gave Shah the floor again and he said that it was difficult to comment because people do not ask such questions in Denmark, but he also added that this had not been a problem abroad. Quite an interesting remark considering the much talk about the importance of circumcision for the community.

There are several international conventions that can be considered when discussing circumcision, but as usual – one is tempted to say – they are mutually contradictory. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Per Larsen, chairman of the Children's Council, commented on, is probably the strongest, and it is clear from Article 24, paragraph 3, of this convention that you must not cause suffering to children:

*States Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.*

### **Politicians are highly divided**

It seems that Danish politicians are highly divided on the issue of circumcision, even though the vast majority of the population in opinion polls are against circumcision. I find it difficult to understand this, unless you are worried about the export of goods to Muslim countries and fear a new "Arla affair," where the Danish company selling dairy products apologised for some cartoons it had nothing to do with.

Danish doctors, on the other hand, have no doubts. When the National Board of Health revised its "Guidance on circumcision of boys" in December 2013, the revision was sent around for a hearing. The Danish Medical Association, the Danish Surgical Society and the Danish Society for General Practitioners all gave highly critical comments. In the view of the Medical Association, ritual circumcision of boys should only "be carried out based on informed consent of the boy/young man in question." The Danish Surgical Society "is fundamentally opposed to surgical interventions on healthy minors with no medical indication." The Danish Society for General Practitioners wrote that "circumcision must only be performed on medical indication." And on the Society's website, the general practitioners stated: "If circumcision is carried out without medical indication, it is mutilation."

Other consultation responses were also interesting. The Danish Paediatric Society believed that it should be stated that "ritual circumcision is medically unfounded and is equated with a cosmetic procedure," for which you normally have to be 15 years old to be able to give consent.

The Children's Council stated that the National Board of Health is failing in its responsibility according to Article 4 on good governance in the Children's Convention with regard to Article 3 (the principle of the best interests of the child) and Article 19 (protection of the child against any form of violence) by not mentioning in the instructions what needs to be considered before a doctor participates in circumcision.

Children's Conditions believed that the intervention is in violation of legal and ethical principles, as the intervention is irreversible, and Sex and Society recommended that the more fundamental questions about the child's rights and the right to bodily integrity should be dealt with before the National Board of Health cemented the existing practice with guidance.

### **Ban male circumcision, doctors must refuse to participate**

As far as I can see, there is only one thing to do: Ban male circumcision in the same way that female circumcision is banned, and do it now. There is no need to wait any longer and cause even more boys unnecessary suffering that may last a lifetime.

I agree with Morten Frisch, who wrote in Politiken on 4 March 2014: "Let Danish boys be the first in the world who can grow up in the safe belief that no one is allowed to change their genitals, unless there are compelling medical reasons for it."

Until the ban comes, Danish doctors should themselves contribute to preventing circumcision. According to the National Board of Health, circumcision of boys is an operative intervention within the meaning of the Authorization Act, and thus reserved for doctors. Remarkably, the National Board of Health allows non-doctors to perform the circumcision, but this requires that a doctor is present during the procedure. Since we doctors should not contribute to ritual circumcision at all, as it goes against our medical promise to first and foremost not cause harm (*primum non nocere*), and both the Medical Association and the Danish Surgical Society are against it, it is clear what Danish doctors should do: Refuse to participate in ritual circumcision.

At Rigshospitalet, 315 boys were ritually circumcised in the period 1997-2003. I do not understand why my colleagues have agreed to carry out such a barbaric operation without an indication, and how the National Board of Health can come up with a guide for doctors on how to carry out an unethical operation. It may well be that the politicians are hesitating and that the National Board of Health drags its feet, which it often does when it will cause trouble to make the right decisions. But doctors shouldn't do that. So go ahead and say no.