



## European network of legal experts in gender equality and non-discrimination

### FLASH REPORT

<b>Country:</b>	Cyprus
<b>Title:</b>	Religious clothing in education
<b>Date:</b>	4 October 2019
<b>Expert:</b>	Corina Demetriou
<b>Context</b>	
<b>Issue at stake:</b>	School principal asks a student to remove her headscarf or go home, causing an uproar in the community
<b>Grounds of discrimination:</b>	Religion or belief
<b>Field of application:</b>	Education
<b>Source:</b>	Press releases and media reports
<b>Applicable law:</b>	Law in equal treatment (race or ethnic origin) N. 59(I)/2004 (to the extent that religion can be seen as a pretext for ethnic discrimination), Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus article 28 (non-discrimination on all grounds in all fields), Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus Article 18 (freedom of religion, all religions are equal before the law)

### Content

**Policy development:** On 6<sup>th</sup> September 2019, the first day of school, the newly appointed headmaster of a major school in Nicosia asked a Syrian female student to remove her headscarf or go home. The student left the school grounds as the principal was heard saying that 'his school was not a place for Taliban sympathizers or nuns'. The student had already attended the same school for two years wearing a headscarf and was described by her classmates as a model student. Her headscarf was not an issue in the previous years. The school principal told the press that he was merely following the rules which require that student's heads should be left uncovered and that he had no issues with anybody's religion. The superintendent of secondary education however stated that there were no rules against religious dress and that the schools were not instructed to discriminate against students based on their dress code. The family of the student however told the press that when they visited the Ministry to file their complaint, they were told to transfer to another school because the headmaster is a difficult person.

Reactions to the school principal's act varied, but most stakeholders positioned themselves against it. The national confederation of parents' associations issued a statement on the same day with strong language against the school principal, pointing out that educationalists are under a duty to teach respect to diversity and to the children's religious beliefs and to refrain from teaching racism to the children.<sup>1</sup> Similar statements were issued

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<sup>1</sup> National Confederation of Parents Associations of Secondary Education (2019), 'Secondary Education Parents: The behaviour of the school principal in Nicosia's Lyceum is unacceptable', Press statement, 6 September 2019, available at [https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/06/goneis-mesis-aparadekti-symperifora-dieythynti-se-lykeio-tis-leykosias/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter&fbclid=IwAR0hA2zDdQkCxitk1RLuiSH4IC4fhrX7\\_KBDAGkc7GozU\\_EV0sr99D-ZjWU](https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/06/goneis-mesis-aparadekti-symperifora-dieythynti-se-lykeio-tis-leykosias/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter&fbclid=IwAR0hA2zDdQkCxitk1RLuiSH4IC4fhrX7_KBDAGkc7GozU_EV0sr99D-ZjWU).

by teachers' unions,<sup>2</sup> whilst the communist party<sup>3</sup> and the Commissioner for the rights of the child<sup>4</sup> called for an investigation by the Attorney General. The Ministry of Education issued a statement that it condemns 'arbitrary policies from heads of schools which are contrary to the Ministry's expressed educational policy, which respects the personality of each student irrespective of specificities, identities or beliefs'.<sup>5</sup> The Ombudsman also pledged to investigate the incident.

Rather than launch an investigation or report the incident to the Attorney General, the Minister of Education visited the school, took photographs of himself and the school principal embracing the student in her headscarf and told the press that the problem was resolved. However, the student population of the school was not content with this development and planned a symbolic takeover of the school in order to stop the headmaster from entering the school grounds. Following the announcement of the students' intended mobilisation, the Ministry of Education transferred the school principal to another senior position in a public training institute. The student was able to remain in school with her headscarf.

At the time of writing, no investigation was completed, and no report was published. The Nazi party ELAM submitted a proposal to Parliament for the prohibition of the Islamic clothing in the public sphere citing issues of security, the emancipation of women and the preservation of the Greek orthodox character of Cyprus. ELAM alleged that there are ECtHR decisions that support the legitimacy of such measures in other countries.<sup>6</sup>

**Key points of analysis:** For years, schools in Cyprus were attended by Muslim students in headscarves without any issues. A former Education Minister had in fact clarified that students in headscarves are most welcome in Cypriot schools. In the case at hand, public debates included arguments against the use of headscarves in schools as a manifestation of secularism and as a feminist measure. The example of France was repeatedly cited, without however introducing data on the number of Muslim girls who had to leave French schools because of the headscarf ban. In some cases, the secularist argument was accompanied with claims that Christian symbols should be banned. This led to an allegation by the Nazi party ELAM in parliament that in a particular school the teachers forcibly removed a cross from a student's wrist,<sup>7</sup> which was subsequently found to be false.<sup>8</sup> The public debate had little focus on the unqualified right to education is foreseen in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to freedom of religion and to the 'christianocentric' character of Greek-Cypriot education that creates situations of 'otherness' in schools.

Three weeks after the incident, public debates have subsided, and the incident appears forgotten. The transfer of the school principal to another senior position and the initial

<sup>2</sup> OELMEK (Organisation of Greek Secondary Education Teachers), OELMEK condemns the action of the principal to send away a student because she was wearing a headscarf, Press release 07.09.2019, available at <https://paideia-news.com/oelmek/2019/09/07/i-oelmek-katadikazei-tin-energeia-dieythynti-na-dioksei-mathitria-epeidi-foroyse-mantila/>.

<sup>3</sup> AKEL, 'An effort to cover the racist behaviour of a school principal', Press release 07.09.2019, available at [https://www.akel.org.cy/2019/09/07/prospatheia-syggkalis-sistiki-symperiforas-dieythinti/?fbclid=IwAR00kTXydkP6-qhU12BCo-mfSaTW5sbi\\_eeRV2MAiMevmACneDrLjVrbgO0#.XXQJ92ZS\\_cs](https://www.akel.org.cy/2019/09/07/prospatheia-syggkalis-sistiki-symperiforas-dieythinti/?fbclid=IwAR00kTXydkP6-qhU12BCo-mfSaTW5sbi_eeRV2MAiMevmACneDrLjVrbgO0#.XXQJ92ZS_cs).

<sup>4</sup> Reporter, 'Koursoumba calls for the intervention of the Attorney General for the student in headscarf', 7 September 2019, available at [www.reporter.com.cy/local-news/article/553702/](http://www.reporter.com.cy/local-news/article/553702/).

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Education, Press release regarding the incident at a Nicosia Lyceum, 6 September 2019, available at [https://www.pio.gov.cy/%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%BD%CF%89%CE%B8%CE%AD%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1-%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%BF.html?id=9435&fbclid=IwAR0R6R\\_eSzY2moK2Fq5C7J9IQs0F8CMTThHzIH6MXdOokXzKZ1pyTjkWqE#flat](https://www.pio.gov.cy/%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%BD%CF%89%CE%B8%CE%AD%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1-%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%BF.html?id=9435&fbclid=IwAR0R6R_eSzY2moK2Fq5C7J9IQs0F8CMTThHzIH6MXdOokXzKZ1pyTjkWqE#flat).

<sup>6</sup> ELAM (2019) 'No to the Islamic dress which refers to women's emancipation', <https://elamcy.com/ch-christou-ochi-sti-islamiki-endymasia-pou-parapempei-sti-cheirafetisi-ton-gynaikon/>.

<sup>7</sup> ELAM (2019), 'They removed a cross from a student but no-one cared', 11 September 2019, available at <https://elamcy.com/ch-christou-afairesan-ton-stavro-apo-mathitria-alla-kaneis-den-endiaferthike/>.

<sup>8</sup> Offsite (2019) 'POED says differently about the removal of the cross', 11 September 2019, available at <https://www.offsite.com.cy/eidiseis/topika/alla-leei-i-poed-gia-tin-ypothesi-me-afairesi-stayroy>.

reaction of encouraging the student to change school suggests that the authorities are not committed to addressing religious discrimination in education.

**Internet link source:** Various press statements on the issue:

[https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/13/synd.-goneon-lykeioy-akropoleos-pros-xampiaoyri-o-k.-sepos-einai-enas-apo-toys-kalyteroys-dieythyntes/?fbclid=IwAR2Cr6-1\\_K\\_8Z8rhIR7MZRuZcIxOddRCheNpC\\_INOvvlcJkcwto4cshk1U](https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/13/synd.-goneon-lykeioy-akropoleos-pros-xampiaoyri-o-k.-sepos-einai-enas-apo-toys-kalyteroys-dieythyntes/?fbclid=IwAR2Cr6-1_K_8Z8rhIR7MZRuZcIxOddRCheNpC_INOvvlcJkcwto4cshk1U).

[https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/06/goneis-mesis-aparadekti-symperifora-dieythynti-se-lykeio-tis-leykosias/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter&fbclid=IwAR0hA2zDdQkCxitk1RLuiSH4IC4fhrX7\\_KBDAGkc7GozU\\_EV0sr99D-ZjWU](https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/06/goneis-mesis-aparadekti-symperifora-dieythynti-se-lykeio-tis-leykosias/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter&fbclid=IwAR0hA2zDdQkCxitk1RLuiSH4IC4fhrX7_KBDAGkc7GozU_EV0sr99D-ZjWU).

[https://www.pio.gov.cy/%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%BD%CF%89%CE%B8%CE%AD%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1-%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%BF.html?id=9435&fbclid=IwAR0R6R\\_eSzY2moK2Fq5C7J9IQs0F8CMThHezIHL6MXdOokXzKZ1pyTjkWgE#flat](https://www.pio.gov.cy/%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%BD%CF%89%CE%B8%CE%AD%CE%BD%CF%84%CE%B1-%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%BF.html?id=9435&fbclid=IwAR0R6R_eSzY2moK2Fq5C7J9IQs0F8CMThHezIHL6MXdOokXzKZ1pyTjkWgE#flat).

[https://www.cyprushumanists.org/2019/09/07/%ce%b1%ce%bd%ce%b1%ce%ba%ce%bf%ce%af%ce%bd%cf%89%cf%83%ce%b7-%ce%bf%ce%bc%ce%af%ce%bb%ce%bf%cf%85-%ce%b1%ce%bd%ce%b8%cf%81%cf%89%cf%80%ce%b9%cf%83%cf%84%cf%8e%ce%bd-%cf%83%cf%87%ce%b5%cf%84%ce%b9/?fbclid=IwAR0x4PpSJAqpUln-3aIOrzN5CEB-z-f1WLQwCoonQAs0nOgqZhHp9Lhq\\_nQ](https://www.cyprushumanists.org/2019/09/07/%ce%b1%ce%bd%ce%b1%ce%ba%ce%bf%ce%af%ce%bd%cf%89%cf%83%ce%b7-%ce%bf%ce%bc%ce%af%ce%bb%ce%bf%cf%85-%ce%b1%ce%bd%ce%b8%cf%81%cf%89%cf%80%ce%b9%cf%83%cf%84%cf%8e%ce%bd-%cf%83%cf%87%ce%b5%cf%84%ce%b9/?fbclid=IwAR0x4PpSJAqpUln-3aIOrzN5CEB-z-f1WLQwCoonQAs0nOgqZhHp9Lhq_nQ).

[https://www.akel.org.cy/2019/09/07/prospatheia-sygkalipsis-ratsistikis-symperiforas-dieythinti/?fbclid=IwAR00kTXydKP6-qhU12BCo-mfSaTW5sbi\\_eeRV2MAiMevmACneDrLjVrbgO0#.XXQJ92ZS\\_cs](https://www.akel.org.cy/2019/09/07/prospatheia-sygkalipsis-ratsistikis-symperiforas-dieythinti/?fbclid=IwAR00kTXydKP6-qhU12BCo-mfSaTW5sbi_eeRV2MAiMevmACneDrLjVrbgO0#.XXQJ92ZS_cs).

[https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/06/goneis-mesis-aparadekti-symperifora-dieythynti-se-lykeio-tis-leykosias/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter&fbclid=IwAR2AZNHMWxNZABEKrSjkjww7B7vBkgXuga1ZvFrbtuacFWygPshofin7L\\_4](https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/06/goneis-mesis-aparadekti-symperifora-dieythynti-se-lykeio-tis-leykosias/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter&fbclid=IwAR2AZNHMWxNZABEKrSjkjww7B7vBkgXuga1ZvFrbtuacFWygPshofin7L_4).

<https://paideia-news.com/oelmek/2019/09/07/i-oelmek-katadikazei-tin-energeia-dieythynti-na-dioksei-mathitria-epeidi-foroyse-mantila/>.

[https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/13/synd.-goneon-lykeioy-akropoleos-pros-xampiaoyri-o-k.-sepos-einai-enas-apo-toys-kalyteroys-dieythyntes/?fbclid=IwAR1Dqepf508I6ADNLuHhavr1womwrLIam0UZH5oS2NtovYZvDr\\_sfmfR8v4](https://paideia-news.com/goneis-mesis-genikis/2019/09/13/synd.-goneon-lykeioy-akropoleos-pros-xampiaoyri-o-k.-sepos-einai-enas-apo-toys-kalyteroys-dieythyntes/?fbclid=IwAR1Dqepf508I6ADNLuHhavr1womwrLIam0UZH5oS2NtovYZvDr_sfmfR8v4).  
[http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp9637a?fbclid=IwAR1StxopZR1hpgy7n0y6M-iRS1acPjDkTRbLUIJJgpFo8h1WsDe9QWN\\_m1E](http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp9637a?fbclid=IwAR1StxopZR1hpgy7n0y6M-iRS1acPjDkTRbLUIJJgpFo8h1WsDe9QWN_m1E).