

David Cameron backs bans on Muslim face veils as Tories plan crackdown on gender segregation

Prime Minister says it is 'proper and sensible' for Muslim women to remove face veils, like hijabs and niqabs, when asked to by public officials



The most senior judge in England and Wales said he recognised the wearing of the niqab - the Muslim garment which leaves only a woman's eyes visible - was "divisive" Photo: ALAMY

By Peter Dominiczak, and Steven Swinford

10:18PM GMT 18 Jan 2016

Muslim women can be banned from wearing veils in schools, courts and other British institutions, David Cameron has said.

The Prime Minister said that he will give his backing to public authorities that put in place "proper and sensible" rules to ban women from wearing face veils in comments which will reignite debates.

It comes as the Government prepare to announce a series of measures designed to stop British Muslims becoming radicalised and traveling to the Middle East to join terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil).

As part of the plans, ministers will pledge to outlaw gender segregation during meetings in public buildings amid concerns that some Muslim organisations are forcing women to sit separately.

Nicky Morgan, the Education Secretary, will also on Tuesday announce plans to force schools to help stop teenagers travelling abroad to fight alongside jihadist groups such as Isil.

Schools will be required to inform councils when pupils stop attending without any explanation and Muslim parents will be encouraged to carry out checks to ensure their children are not being radicalised.

Mr Cameron has also announced that tens of thousands of Muslim women will face deportation unless they pass a series of English language tests after coming to Britain on spouse visas.

The Prime Minister's comments about veils will reignite the row over whether British institutions should be able to stop women covering their faces for religious reasons in public places.

He refused to endorse a French-style blanket ban but made clear that individual organisations can choose to stop Muslim women wearing the veil.

The Daily Telegraph in 2013 disclosed that more than a dozen NHS hospitals had instructed staff not to wear the niqab — a full veil which covers the face — while in contact with patients.

The same year, a London judge ordered a Muslim defendant to remove her veil, but asked politicians for clearer instructions on veils in court.

A number of Conservative MPs want the Government to consider a full ban on the veil.

“I think in our country people should be free to wear what they like, within limits live how they like, and all the rest of it,” Mr Cameron told BBC Radio 4.

“What does matter is if, for instance, a school has a uniform policy, sensitively put in place and all the rest of it, and people want to flout that uniform policy, often for reasons that aren't connected to religion, you should always come down on the side of the school.”

Mr Cameron added: “When you are coming into contact with an institution or you're in court, or if you need to be able to see someone's face at the border, then I will always back the authority and institution that have put in place proper and sensible rules.

“Going for the more sort of French approach of banning an item of clothing, I don't think that's the way we do things in this country and I don't think that would help.”

France in 2010 banned full-face veils after years of debate.

Philip Hollobone, a Conservative MP, said: "What the Prime Minister says is extremely welcome and a step in the right direction but given the stridency with which Muslim group's advance their cause sooner or later this will be put to the test.

"It should apply to any public official including schools, hospitals, councils, the police, border force, hospitals, GP surgeries. Anywhere where members of the public come into contact and an official needs to have his or her face visible.”

He added: “I don't want to live in a country where a police officer is veiled, where a news reader is veiled, where a nurse or doctor is veiled.”

The Telegraph also understands that ministers are drawing up guidance which will ban gender segregation in public meetings held in buildings owned by town halls.

It follows concerns that Muslim men and women were separated in a series of meetings in the run up to the election.

Mrs Morgan will on Tuesday give a speech at the Bethnal Green Academy, east London, which came to public attention in 2015 when four of its pupils fled to Syria to become “jihadi brides”.

She will announce a new website to help parents and teachers identify potential victims of radicalisation.

The website warns parents and teachers about “excessive time spent online or on mobile phones” as well as being wary of children with a “susceptibility to conspiracy theories and a feeling of persecution”.

She will also announce plans to ensure that schools register with local authorities any pupils that stop attending lessons.

Mrs Morgan will say: “We are determined to keep children safe in and out of school. Today’s announcement of resources and tougher powers to protect young, impressionable minds from radical views sends a clear message to extremists: our children are firmly out of your reach.”

Mr Cameron announced on Monday that immigrants will have to show that they have improved

their English after two-and-a-half years or face being deported.

Under the plans tens of thousands of migrants who come to Britain on a "spouse visa" to join their husband or wife will have to pass an additional English language test after two years.

While Andy Burnham, the shadow home secretary, accused Mr Cameron of "stigmatising a whole community", Naz Shah, the Muslim Labour MP for Bradford West backed his call for more women to learn English.

Religion in the UK

POPULATION BREAKDOWN 2011

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39,389,626 Christian 16,221,393 None
 4,528,284 Not stated 2,786,898 Muslim 835,015 Hindu
 432,374 Sikh 269,681 Jewish 261,789 Buddhist
 262,578 Other

Data: ONS. NISRI. NRScotland

60.6% Christian 25% None
 7% Not stated 4.3% Muslim 3.2% Other

Data: ONS, NISRI, NRScotland

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