

Alþingi
Kirkjustræti
150 Reykjavík

March 27, 2018

Dear Members of the Alþingi,

I wish to express my strong support for the proposed legislation to extend legal protection against child genital cutting (euphemistically known as “circumcision”) to all children that is currently under consideration in your nation’s parliament. This legislation represents not only a laudable effort to redress the gender discrimination that exists in Iceland by expanding the right to a childhood free from unnecessary genital surgery to boys as well as girls, but also has broader global significance as the first attempt by any parliament in the world to do so.

I would particularly like to commend your country’s parliamentarian Ágæta Silja Dögg Gunnarsdóttir, who introduced the bill in the Alþingi, and her fellow co-sponsors Ágæta Ólafur Þór Gunnarsson, Ágæta Inga Sæland, Ágæta Bjarkey Olsen Gunnarsdóttir, Ágæta Ólafur Ísleifsson, Ágæta Jón Þór Ólafsson, Ágæta Guðmundur Ingi Kristinsson, Ágæta Líneik Anna Sævarsdóttir and Ágæta Björn Leví Gunnarsson. Their brave stand serves as an example to legislators in the rest of the world’s nations who are failing in their duty to pass laws that ensure the protection of all children, regardless of gender, from unnecessary genital surgery.

The medical communities of several of your fellow European nations have become increasingly vocal in their condemnation of genital cutting of both female *and* male minors, noting that in both cases it is harmful, unethical and a violation of a child’s right to bodily integrity. European medical organizations have furthermore pointed out that nonconsensual genital cutting of a minor represents a contravention of the central tenet of the Hippocratic Oath, *first do no harm*, and is in conflict with several international conventions, such as the U.N. Declaration of the Rights of the Child. For example, the Royal Dutch Medical Association stated in 2010: “Non-therapeutic circumcision of male minors conflicts with the child’s right to autonomy and physical integrity.” Their statement adds that “circumcision entails the risk of medical and psychological complications... [including] bleeding, infections, meatus stenosis (narrowing of the urethra) and panic attacks.”

Similarly, the Danish Medical Association, speaking on behalf of its 29,185 members, stated in 2016: “Circumcision of boys without a medical indication is ethically unacceptable when the procedure is carried out without informed consent from the person undergoing the surgery.” Their report concludes that “circumcision should not be performed before the boy is 18 years old and able to decide whether this is an operation he wants.” Public opinion in Denmark also seems to be shifting in favor of equal protection, with one nationally representative poll from 2016 showing that 87 percent of Danes are in favor of a law protecting males under 18 years of age from non-therapeutic genital cutting. Clearly, your nation’s proposal for equal protection is grounded both in a growing consensus within the European medical community and high levels of public support.

Regrettably, though also predictably, certain religious figures who (falsely) purport to be speaking on behalf of their entire religious tradition are attempting to derail this effort on the spurious grounds that it represents an attack on religious liberty. I urge members of the Alþingi not be swayed by this baseless accusation or browbeaten or guilt-tripped into backing down from their principled stand against child genital cutting and support for equal protection under the law for both genders. I believe strongly that parents do not have the right to impose their religion on their children via an invasive and irreversible surgery on the most private area of their bodies. Far from being an affront to religious liberty, the proposal in fact promotes it by allowing people to decide for themselves when they are of consenting age whether they wish to partake in this particular ritual of their parents’ religion. Many people do not go on to follow the religion of their parents and it is an insult to assume that every child will do so automatically. Furthermore, the religious figures attacking the proposal do not speak for the entirety of their co-religionists as evidenced by growing genital integrity currents within Judaism and Islam. The existence of organizations such as Jews Against Circumcision and the growing popularity of the Brit Shalom, in which the traditional Bris rituals are recited while excepting the surgery, demonstrate that these communities are not as homogeneous in their support for genital cutting as is implied by those spokespeople who are attacking the proposal. Indeed, many anti-genital cutting and equal protection activists themselves come from Jewish and Muslim family backgrounds, such as Somali-born writer and human rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Israeli columnist Uri Misgiv (both of whom are themselves victims of child genital cutting, female and male respectively).

In solidarity with your brave legislative efforts,
Peter Bolton