

Hamas Requires Gender Segregation in Gaza Schools

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Earlier this month, Hamas released a new set of restrictions that will sex segregate co-ed classrooms in Gaza. The law passed by Hamas, the Islamic group that rules the Palestinian territory, states that c beginning at age nine and also bans male teachers from girls' schools. Government run schools within Gaza have previously been separated by gender. It has started with the new school year in September, Gaza boys and girls in middle and high school will be breaking the law if they study side by side.

A member of the education committee and Hamas lawmaker, Yousef Al-Sherafi, said in an interview: "This law is a safety valve for our national principles... One male staffer among 20 female teachers in a girls' school would not allow our sisters to feel comfortable."

"We are a Muslim society and we all respect our religion," said Walid Mezher, the Education Ministry's legal adviser. "The aim is not to enforce Islam, as some people are saying ... It's simply to honor the traditions and the culture of the society."

Gaza's Islamic militant Hamas rulers argue that the new legislation, mandating gender separation in schools from age nine, enshrines common practice. But women's activists warned Tuesday that it's another step in the Hamas agenda of imposing its fundamentalist world view on Gaza's 1.7 million people. The Gaza rules appear harsh compared to Western practice but are not unusual in parts of the Arab and Muslim world. In Iraq, for example, boys and girls are required by law to study separately after age 12. In conservative Palestinian society, the idea of gender segregation in schools from the onset of puberty is widely accepted. Hamas has been running Gaza since its violent takeover of the crowded coastal territory in 2007. While the group advocates the establishment of an Islamic state in all of the Mideast, including Israel, it has moved cautiously in spreading its ultra-conservative version of Islam.

The Center for Women's Legal Research and Consulting, the only legal-aid organization for women in Gaza, warned that the law is "based on a culture of discrimination against women, by reinforcing gender separation which takes our society back to ancient times when there was no respect for women's rights and women were eliminated from public life." It has issued a series of rules restricting women or requiring them to cover up in the traditional Islamic dress of long robes and headscarves. Other edicts include bans on women smoking water pipes in public, riding on the backs of motorcycles or getting their hair done by male stylists. Last month, it barred girls and women from participating in a U.N.-sponsored marathon, prompting a U.N. aid agency to cancel the race. Hamas activists, including teachers, have also exerted social pressure to get all school girls to wear Islamic dress.

Questions:

1. Do you agree with mandating the “gender segregation in schools” legislation?
2. What are the main reasons for separating girls and boys?
3. Please tell advantages and disadvantages of this legislation.
4. Do you think there should be gender segregation in universities?
5. Why are the women against this law?
6. Have you ever studied in a school with just one gender? Why? If not, what’s your opinion?
7. Do you feel schools treat boys and girls differently? Give us some examples.
8. Based on your learning experience, do you prefer female or male teachers? Why? Does it change or consist?
9. Does our society have different expectations for females and males? What’s your opinion?
10. Do parents treat their sons and daughters differently? Give us some examples.