



MEND's Easy Read Guide
**Nurturing Muslim
Identities in Schools:**

Religious Dress

www.mend.org.uk

mend

A photograph of two women wearing hijabs, one light-colored and one patterned, looking at a laptop screen. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The woman on the left is wearing a light-colored hijab and a dark top, while the woman on the right is wearing a patterned hijab and a patterned top, and has glasses on. They are both smiling and looking at the laptop screen.

What is religious dress for Muslims?

All Muslims are required to dress modestly. For men and boys, this includes covering the body between the waist and the knees. Men may wear a beard as well.

Women are required to cover the hair and the body between the neck and the ankles. There is no agreed time when Muslims believe that a girl should start covering her hair. Some believe it is after the age of 9 when she shows signs of puberty and are considered *baligh* or mature¹. For others, she may start covering her hair much earlier.

There is a great deal of diversity in Muslim religious dress which is influenced by differences in religious interpretations, cultural practices, political factors expression, and social pressures. For example, some women and girls may choose not to cover their hair but may still be uncomfortable wearing tight clothing or short skirts and low-cut tops, others may be happy to wear tight or revealing outfits, while some may choose to wear loose fitting and long clothes as well as covering their face with a niqab.

1. "[Q-ID0104] at What Age Is One Considered Mature (Baligh) in Islam? – SeekersPath." November 10, 2021, <https://www.seekerspath.co.uk/question-bank/children-upbringing/q-id0104-becoming-an-adult-baligh-in-islam/>



**Why is facilitating
for religious dress in
schools important?**

Facilitating religious dress in schools is simple to achieve and has wide-reaching benefits for students and the school environment.

Supporting this practice allows Muslim students to develop their religious identities with confidence and feel secure in their positions as members of society. This is particularly important due to the Islamophobia that many Muslim students face throughout their lives.

Islamophobic and racist bullying in schools still remains an endemic problem. Following terror attacks in London and Manchester Arena in May 2017, Childline recorded a sharp increase in calls from children as young as nine, who reported being called terrorists and enduring abuse and threats of violence. Meanwhile, they also noted that girls who wear the hijab had frequently been victimised for their religious dress, with some expressing a desire to self-harm as a result of the cruel treatment they had received.²

2. Graham Martin, "Kids Branded as Bombers after Terror Attacks - TFN," Third Force News, June 28, 2017, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://tfn.scot/news/kids-branded-as-bombers-after-terror-attacks>

Encouraging and normalising expressions of religious identity within school environments counters the underlying misunderstanding that fuel racially and religiously motivated bullying. Supporting religious, cultural, and ethnic identities, therefore, nurtures understanding across the whole student body and prepares young people for life in a pluralistic society.



A wooden desk with various school supplies. On the left, there is a blue pencil case and a pen. In the center, a spiral-bound notebook is open, showing a page with a list of numbers and some text. To the right, there is a stack of three notebooks: a green one on the bottom, a blue one in the middle, and a black one on top. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

What are the legal responsibilities of schools?

The Equality Act 2010 is designed to protect the rights of individuals and ensure equality of opportunity for everyone, thus promoting a fair and equal society.

The Act covers nine protected characteristics, one of which is 'religion or belief'.

The Public Sector Equality Duty, created by Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, demands that public bodies (such as schools) must give due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and any other unlawful conduct in the Equality Act 2010.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

At the same time, Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998 (freedom of thought, belief and religion) protects the right to put your thoughts and beliefs into action, including:

- The right to wear religious clothing,
- And the right to take part in religious worship.

As public bodies, schools must respect and protect these human rights.



A group of diverse students walking outdoors, possibly on a school campus. In the foreground, four students are visible: a young woman of Asian descent on the left holding a folder, a young woman of Hispanic descent in the center, a young woman wearing a black hijab, and a young woman of European descent on the right with blonde hair in a braid. A young man is partially visible behind them. The image has a dark, semi-transparent overlay with the text "What does this mean for schools?" in white. The background shows a modern building with large windows and some greenery.

**What does this
mean for schools?**

In other words, schools must always consider how their policies and decisions impact people who are protected under the Equality Act.

The Department for Education released advice for school leaders, school staff, governing bodies, and local authorities on how best to fulfil the Public Sector Equality Duty. Specifically, they state that one of the ways to advance 'equality of opportunity' is to meet the needs of people who have a particular characteristic.

Therefore, schools should be willing to review their uniform policies to accommodate the emerging needs of Muslim students. Accommodations, such as enabling Muslim students to wear the hijab or dress modestly as part of a uniform policy, are important steps in fulfilling this Public Sector Equality Duty as they support students to fully engage with public life through encouraging confidence in their identity and sense of belonging.

Schools must also be aware of avoiding any direct or indirect discrimination against people with protected characteristics protected by the Equality Act. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, “the way in which school facilities are provided can lead to discrimination”.

Indirect discrimination can take the form of, for example, a school that bans long skirts or long-sleeved shirts which, although it may seem to be equally applied to all children, will disproportionately impact Muslim students who wish to dress modestly.




A black and white photograph of three young people, likely students, smiling and looking down at something out of frame. On the left, a young man wears a patterned kufi and glasses. In the center, a young woman wears a light-colored hijab with a floral pattern. On the right, a young woman wears a dark hijab with a feather pattern. They are all wearing dark, textured sweaters.

**How can my school
accommodate Muslim
religious dress?**

The provision of religious dress is relatively simple to facilitate. Schools should consider their uniform and dress expectations and think about how they can make adjustments to accommodate the needs of their Muslim students.

Simple accommodations include having options for looser fitting clothes, long sleeves, leg coverings, and hijab as part of any uniform policy.

Schools should aim to consult students and parents as well as community leaders of religious groups when attempting to reform uniform policies so that any policies reflect the needs of all students.

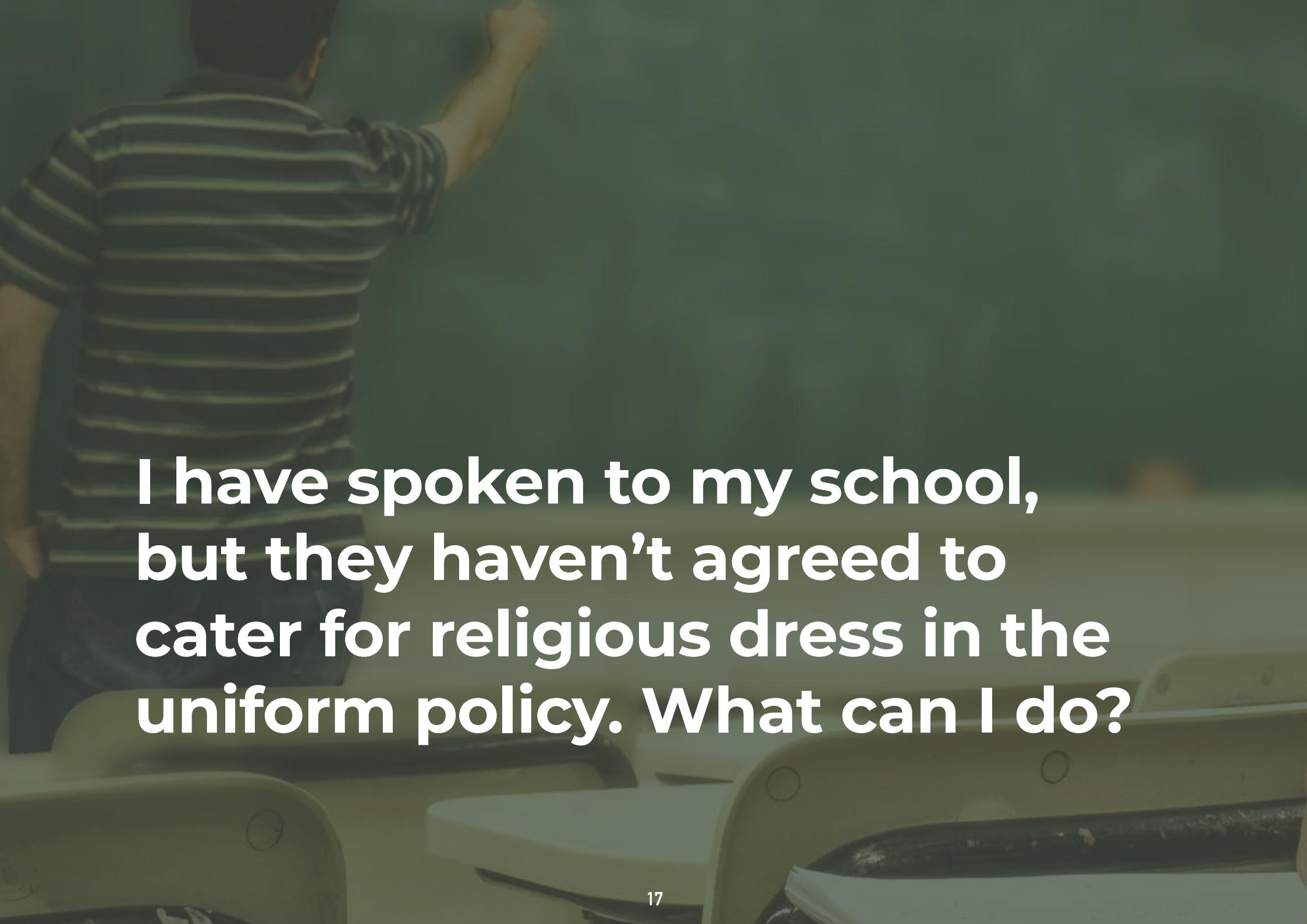
A grayscale photograph of a young woman wearing a light-colored hijab, looking down with a slight smile. In the background, other people are visible but out of focus.

**My school doesn't
accommodate
religious dress.
What can I do?**

- Read the school's policies, procedures, and guidelines which are usually published on the governance section of their website.
- Speak to the headteacher.

Discuss with them:

- The benefits of catering for religious dress in the school uniform,
- Why it is important to you/ your child,
- What the law says,
- What their current policies and procedures state,
- How they can facilitate religious dress as part of the school uniform.

A person wearing a dark and light striped short-sleeved shirt is seen from the back, standing in a classroom and writing on a green chalkboard. The foreground shows the backs of several rows of light-colored plastic school chairs. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

**I have spoken to my school,
but they haven't agreed to
cater for religious dress in the
uniform policy. What can I do?**

At any time during the process, you can contact the **Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU)**.

The Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU), is a charity dedicated to supporting victims of Islamophobia. It was founded in response to rising anti-Muslim attacks, and the growing tide of anti-Muslim sentiment, across the United Kingdom. This service is for anyone who suffers or has suffered, an incident of hate crime or discrimination as a result of their Muslim faith (or perceived Muslim faith). The IRU offers a platform for victims of Islamophobic hate crime and discrimination to confidentially report and share their experiences and serves as a source for free legal assistance.



IRU | ISLAMOPHOBIA
RESPONSE UNIT

Find out more and contact the IRU
at www.theiru.org.uk

0203 904 6555 | info@theiru.org.uk

Muslim engagement
& development

mend

    /mendcommunity | www.mend.org.uk