

Switzerland: Muslim students must shake hands with female teachers or face fine

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Geneva: Muslim school students in the Swiss canton of Basel cannot refuse to shake hands with their female teachers on religious grounds, otherwise their parents will face fines, local authorities have ruled.

“The public interest with respect to equality between men and women and the integration of foreigners significantly outweighs the freedom of conscience (freedom of religion) of the students,” the department of education, culture and sport in the canton of Basel-Landschaft, northern Switzerland, said on Wednesday, RT online reported.

According to the department, if students refuse to shake hands, it means that they involve others “in a religious act.”

“The social gesture of a handshake is important for the employability of the students later in their professional lives,” it said.

Thus, if such an incident happens, the parents of a student who refuses to shake hands will have to pay a fine of up to 5,000 francs (\$5,046), the legislation states. Also the child may face “educational, useful, necessary and proportionate” measures.

The ruling comes almost two months after a controversial case in the northern Swiss municipality of Therwil, Basel canton, when two male pupils, aged 14 and 15, refused to shake hands with their female teachers. They said this went against their religious beliefs.

The boys argued that Islam does not permit any physical contact between members of the opposite sex, unless it is between family members.

The school then passed a controversial ruling, saying that the students will no longer have to shake hands with female teachers. On Wednesday the authorities said they abolished the ruling.

Justice Minister Simonetta Sommaruga then said that “shaking hands is part of our culture” and Christoph Eymann, who heads the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education added: “We cannot tolerate that women in the public service are treated differently from men.”

The “shaking-hands” incident is not the first of this kind in Switzerland. In November, the Swiss canton of Ticino said women wearing the burqa or niqab would be faced with a fine of up to \$9,790, after the government made it illegal for them to wear the veils in public.

The law makes no exceptions for tourists. People visiting Ticino will be informed at airports and by customs officials at the Italian border that it is unlawful in the canton to hide their face.

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