

# Impact of NHS England uniform policies on Muslim female healthcare professionals

## Results from a national audit and survey



**ST3 Ophthalmology, Gloucestershire Hospitals NHSFT**

**1<sup>st</sup> May 2025**

# Introduction

- ST3 Ophthalmology resident/ research fellow
- South-West of England
- Personal experience of issues wearing hijab in theatre
- Led me to research the guidance and advocate for change locally and regionally
- And then nationally as BIMA Dress Codes Lead

# Plan

- Refresher of current national guidance
- Results from our national audit
- Results from our national survey
- Support for updating local policies

# Background

- NHS hospital uniform policies can be tricky to navigate for Muslim female healthcare professionals (HCPS) due to:
  - Bare Below Elbow (BBE) rules
  - Preventing headscarves in theatre
- Local guidance varies from trust to trust, but there is a national guidance for NHS England

# Does this affect many healthcare professionals?

- Although Muslims account for 5% of the population in England, they comprise 10% of the medical workforce overall and 17% of all doctors<sup>1</sup>
- Of Ophthalmologists in England, 17.4% identify as Muslim and **5.4%** identify as Muslim and female
- When combined with orthoptists, optometrists and other allied vision health professionals, 15.2% identify as Muslim and **7.0%** identify as Muslim and female.

SCAN ME



Publications approval reference: 001559

Date: 2 April 2020



## Uniforms and workwear: guidance for NHS employers



NHS England and NHS Improvement



# Summary of guidance – religious head coverings

<p>Headscarves must be worn unadorned and secured neatly.</p> <p>In surgical theatres:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Normal cloth headscarves may be worn for each theatre attendance and subsequently washed at 60C with or without an additional theatre cap.</li><li>• Orthopaedic hoods need to be opaque and cover the chest to fully meet faith requirements, in so far as it doesn't cover chest – as long as</li></ul>	<p>Headwear, for example, turbans and kipot, veils (Christian or niqab) and headscarves are permitted on religious grounds, provided that patient care, health and safety, infection control and security and safety of patients or staff is not compromised.</p> <p>The outline for Headwear, builds on the <i>Dress Codes and Uniform policy</i> developed and implemented by University</p>
<p>garments are secured neatly this is reasonable from infection control point of view. Alternatively, orthopaedic hoods or single use theatre disposable headscarves approved by infection control may be worn.</p>	<p>College London Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (UCLH), May 2018 <sup>2</sup></p>




# Summary of guidance – religious head coverings

**GUIDANCE TO THE USE OF HIJAB/HEADCOVERINGS IN THEATRE**

BRITISH ISLAMIC MEDICAL ASSOCIATION  
Reference: NHS England Uniforms & Workwear Guidance 2020  
► BIL/2AOM/JS



**REUSABLE OPTIONS**

Similar guidance applies to other headcoverings e.g turbans, kippahs




**BRING DEDICATED HIJAB WASHED AT 60°C**      **CHANGE TO DEDICATED HIJAB**      **CHANGE HIJAB IF SOILED**

**DISPOSABLE OPTIONS**

**ORTHOPAEDIC HOOD**      **DISPOSABLE HIJAB**

**DON'T**

**WEAR HIJAB WHICH HAS BEEN WORN OUTSIDE THEATRE ENVIRONMENT**      **WEAR DANGLING HIJAB**      **KEEP WEARING SOILED HIJAB**

## Disposable



**Medline (UK)**- £1.10 each, box of 200  
Triangular fabric which can be folded into a Hijab. Will need to use pins to secure scarf neatly  
Email: [uksales@medline.com](mailto:uksales@medline.com)



**Squadron Medical (UK)**- £1.14 each, box of 40  
Surgical hood, one size fits all  
Email: [orders@squadronmedical.co.uk](mailto:orders@squadronmedical.co.uk)



**Medicos (Malaysia)**- £0.60 each, box of 500 (excluding shipping)  
One size fits all slip-on headwear. Advised to be worn over a Hijab as the material is more transparent  
Shop at: [www.medicos.com.my/product/tudung-protective-cap](http://www.medicos.com.my/product/tudung-protective-cap)

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# Royal College of Surgeons

# Grassroots Project

# The Surgical Scarf Project

## DRESS CODE GUIDANCE

The Surgical Scarf Project

FOR CLINICAL AREAS INCLUDING SURGICAL THEATRES

The following guidance is written for all clinical staff to support healthcare professionals who wear religious head coverings. It is in keeping with Uniforms and Workwear guidance from NHS England (April 2020) [1] which aims to support a more inclusive and culturally diverse NHS for our staff, patients and carers.

Headwear such as headscarves, veils, turbans, and kippah worn based on religious grounds are permitted in clinical areas including surgical theatres provided that patient care, health and safety, infection control, and safety of patients or staff is not compromised. [1] It is recommended that the following changes are implemented in local trust policy once agreed with infection prevention teams and equality and diversity steering groups:

- ▶ In Islam, many Muslim women wear the hijab/headscarf in adherence to their religious dress code. Clean, cloth headscarves, secured neatly can be worn for each theatre attendance with or without an additional theatre cap. Alternatively, orthopaedic hoods or single use \*disposable headscarves can be used. Staff, who, for religious reasons wish to keep their arms covered may wear full length sleeves for non-direct patient care, or three-quarter length sleeves for direct patient care on wards. Alternatively, \*disposable over-sleeves may be used and must be discarded in the same way as disposable gloves. Strict hand-washing procedures must still be observed. [1]
- ▶ In Sikhism, both men and women may wear a head covering called the turban, which is a symbol of their faith and is permitted in theatre with or without a theatre cap.
- ▶ In Judaism, some men wear a kippah (skull cap) and some women wear the tichel (headscarf). The kippah/tichel is a sign of the Jewish faith and identity and is permitted in theatre with or without a theatre cap.
- ▶ Some people of African heritage may wear braided hairstyles and textured hair may take up more volume, therefore efforts should be made to support these individuals, for example by providing larger surgical (mob) caps.



\*Details on where to procure disposable headscarves and over-sleeves can be found in the British Islamic Medical Association Modest Wear Catalogue. [2]

Headwear related to any additional religious or cultural beliefs not mentioned specifically can be discussed and managed at local organisation level based on individual requirements.

References:

1 <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/uniforms-and-workwear-guidance-2-april-2020.pdf>

2 <https://britishim.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Modest-Wear-Catalogue.pdf>



supported by:

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British Association of Black Surgeons



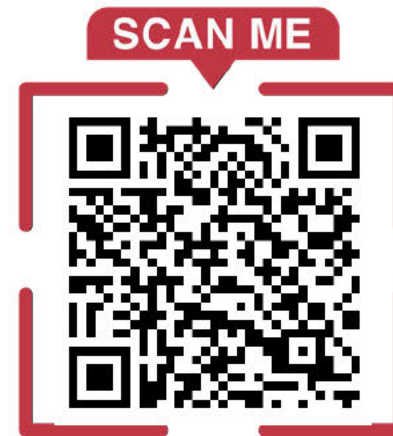
# The evidence is for handwashing not bare below elbows itself

## 3.1 Patient safety

Effective hygiene and preventing infection transmissions are absolutes in all healthcare settings. Although there is **no conclusive evidence that uniforms and workwear play a direct role in spreading infection**, the clothes that staff wear should facilitate good care practices and minimise any risk to patients. Uniforms and workwear should not impede effective hand hygiene and should not unintentionally come into contact with patients during direct patient care activities. Similarly, nothing should be worn that could compromise patient or staff safety during care, for example any nails products, rings, earrings other than studs, and necklaces. Local policies may allow a single plain metal ring, such as a wedding ring.

# Summary of guidance: Bare Below Elbows

Where, for religious reasons, members of staff wish to cover their forearms or wear a bracelet when not engaged in patient care, ensure that sleeves or bracelets can be pushed up the arm and secured in place for hand washing and direct patient care activity. <sup>\*1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> In a few instances, staff have expressed a preference for disposable over-sleeves – elasticated at the wrist and elbow – to cover forearms during patient care activity. Disposable over-sleeves can be worn where gloves are used, but strict adherence to washing hands and wrists must be observed before and after use. Over-sleeves must be discarded in exactly the same way as disposable gloves.

## GUIDANCE ON FOREARM COVERING



Reference:  
NHS England Uniforms & Workwear Guidance 2020  
[bit.ly/2AOMj5S](https://bit.ly/2AOMj5S)

### DO'S

**SLEEVES CAN BE FULL-LENGTH WHEN STAFF IS NOT ENGAGED IN DIRECT PATIENT CARE ACTIVITY\***

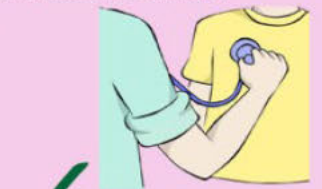


\*Please see guidance for exceptions to this rule

**ROLL-BACK SLEEVES & KEEP THEM SECURELY IN PLACE DURING:**



**HAND-WASHING**



**DIRECT PATIENT CARE**

**DISPOSABLE OVER-SLEEVES MAY BE USED BUT MUST BE PUT ON AND DISCARDED IN EXACTLY THE SAME WAY AS DISPOSABLE GLOVES**

### WHO 5 MOMENTS OF HAND HYGIENE

Before touching a patient

After touching a patient

Before clean/aseptic procedure

After Body Fluid Exposure/Risk

After touching patient surround-ings



**UNIFORMS CAN HAVE 3/4 LENGTH SLEEVES**

### DON'T



**ANY FULL OR 3/4 LENGTH SLEEVES MUST NOT BE LOOSE OR DANGLING**

# Aim of the audit

**To investigate the compliance of local NHS England uniform policies with the '2020 NHS England Uniform and Workwear: guidance for NHS employers' with regards to provision for:**

1. Religious head coverings in theatre
2. Full sleeves when not engaged in patient care
3. Disposable oversleeves when engaged in patient care

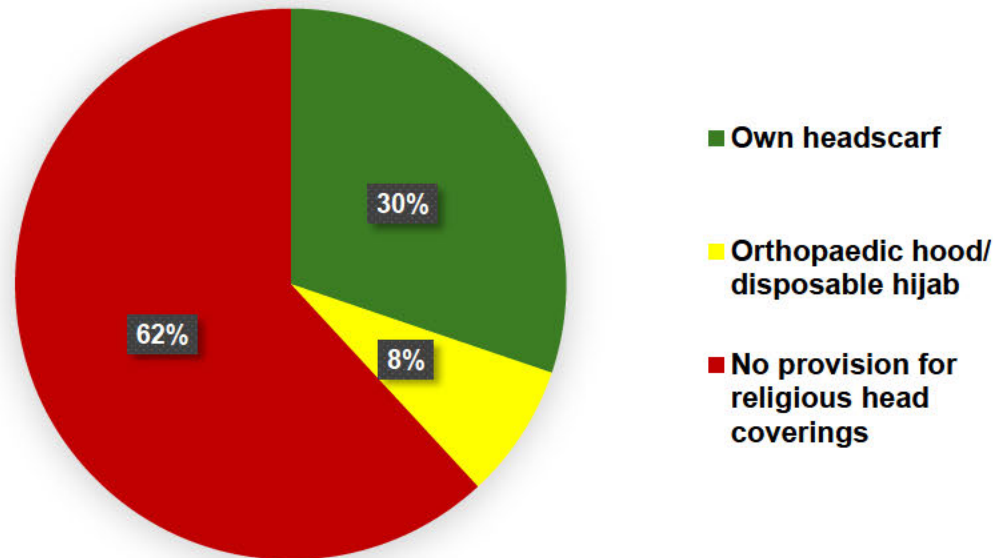
# Methods

- Freedom of Information requests to access local uniform policies were sent to all 211 NHS England trusts, as listed on the NHS England Provider directory between 29/07/2024 and 05/08/2024.
- Uniform policies were compared to the '2020 NHS England Uniform and Workwear: guidance for NHS employers'.

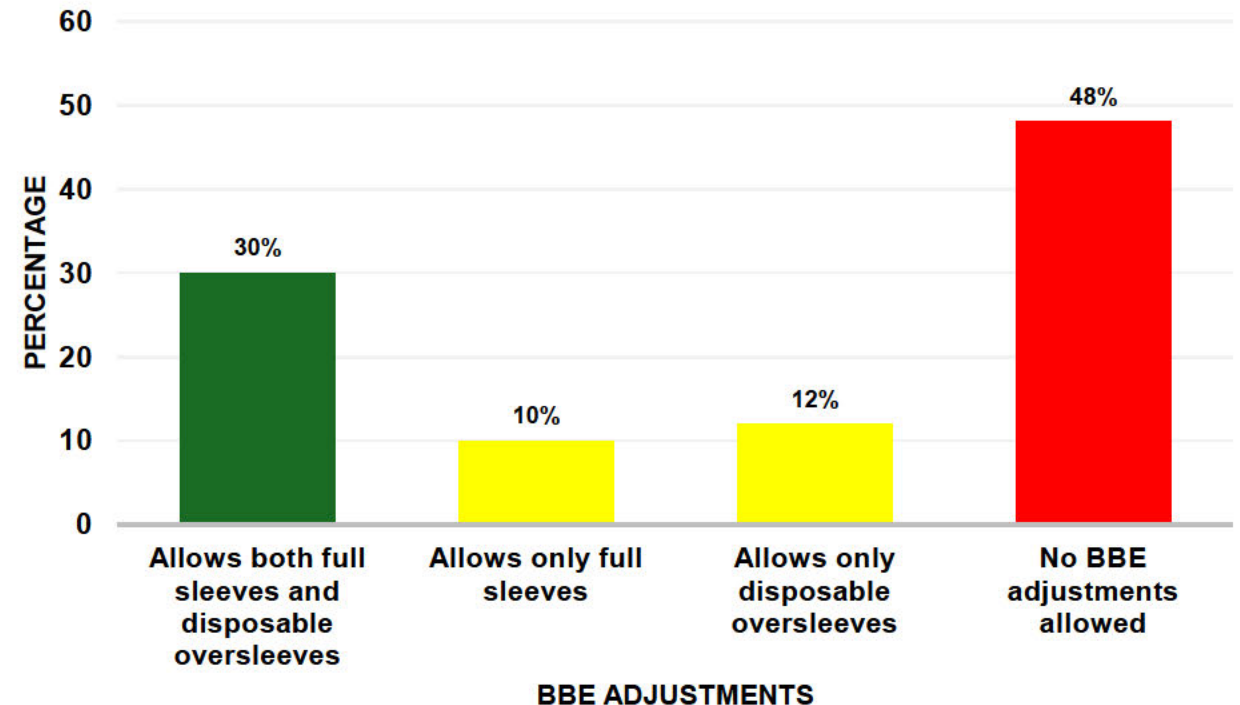
# National Audit of all uniform policies in NHS England

- Overall, 200 out of 211 uniform policies were received (95%)

Provision for religious head coverings within NHS England Hospital trusts



Bare Below Elbow (BBE) adjustments within NHS England trusts



# Aim of the survey

**To investigate if NHS England uniform policies are adversely affecting Muslim female Healthcare professionals, despite national guidance**

# Methods

- Self-completed cross-sectional survey
- Eligibility criteria: Muslim female healthcare professionals or healthcare students in NHS England since April 2020
- Conducted online via Qualtrics
- Survey open between 31/08/2024 until 30/09/2024
- Advertised through BIMA annual conference, BIMA social media and WhatsApp networks.

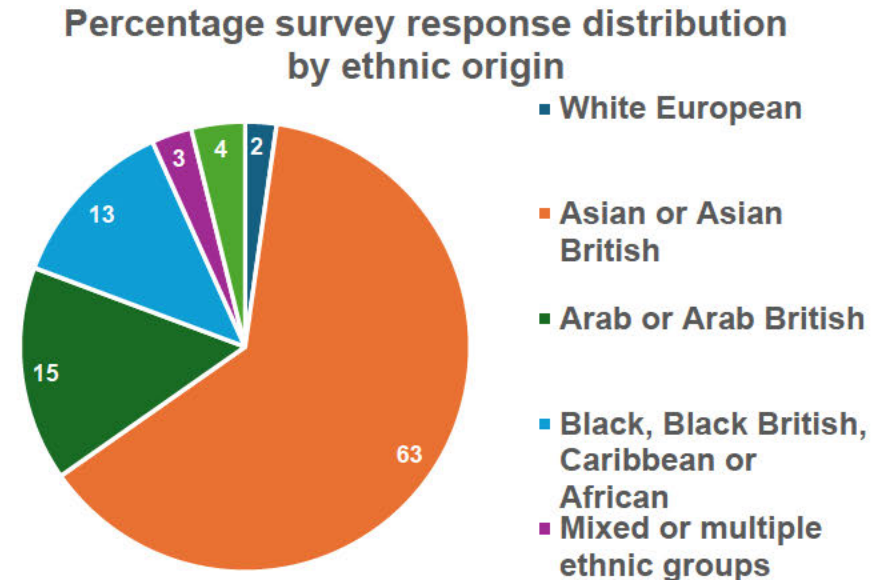
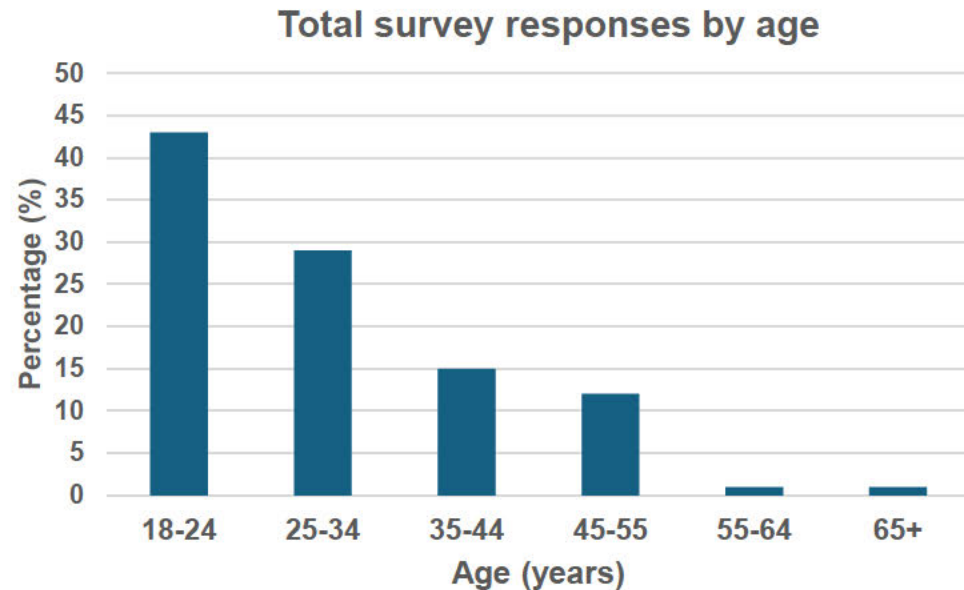


# Themes explored

- Issues with wearing headscarves in theatres
- Issues with covering forearms
- Raising concerns within the workplace
- Impact on mental health
- Knowledge of the 2020 NHS England Uniform and Workwear guidance

# Results: Demographics

- Overall, 430 responses were received
- There were a mix of professionals working across a range of specialties: Doctors (35%), Medical/Dental students (28%), Nurses (11%), Dentists (5%) and other allied health professionals



# Results: Headscarf in theatres

Have you ever been prevented from wearing your headscarf in theatres?

- 27% Yes
- 73% No

# Direct quotes: Headscarves in theatre

- “When I was a student nurse and had a placement I was made to feel intimidated by a member of IPC who told me to remove my hijab or I would not be able to observe the operations. I told her I couldn’t remove the hijab as it was a religious requirement to which she replied that I couldn’t observe the procedures then as I was breaching infection control and uniform policy. I asked her if there were any sterile disposable hijabs which are available in some trusts but she only had the see through theatre caps which did not cover my neck. She did not let me enter any theatre despite that being my allocated placement area and instead sent me to theatre recovery for two weeks instead.”
- “I have been told I cannot come into theatres with my headscarf, despite wearing a clean one, tucking it into my scrubs and wearing a cap on top. This experience left me feeling very anxious as I was only a second year student and I had only newly started placement. On another occasion, in the changing room I was told to "take that thing off my head" before going into theatres. This was by two staff members unknown to me, they came in and asked "are you a student?" and then proceeded to say some very rude things as stated above and more. Despite these experiences, I have not removed my hijab because it is a big part of my and my identity so despite the comments and pressure, I did not succumb, instead I avoided theatres as much as I could.”

# Direct quotes: Headscarves in theatre

- “I was challenged when I first started at the trust and had a lot of attitude from theatre scrub staff and ODPs. I escalated it to my clinical lead at the time using examples from BIMA and national uniform guidance in the NHS but was dismissed by my lead as perceived hostility. I then escalated to the surgical director and my training programme director who had to intervene to resolve things. And that's as an orthopaedic training registrar at that!”
- “I have never been made to feel I have to take it off but I have been made to feel uncomfortable and somewhat a nuisance. I remember the theatre staff said I could not go in with my headscarf because it's infection control risk. My consultant defended me for my learning. So they huffed until they could find me a surgical hair mask that was bigger enough for me to wrap around my whole head. I did feel so silly and was made to feel which a nuisance”

# Results: Bare Below Elbow

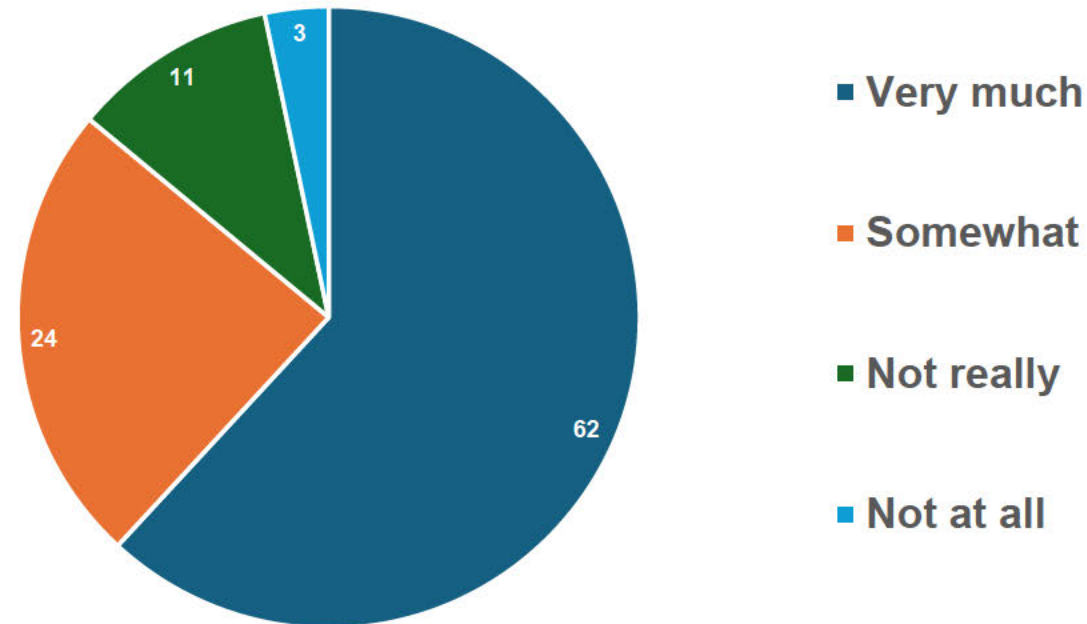
Have you been asked to be bare below elbows when not engaged in direct patient care activity?

- Yes 72%
- No 28%

# Results: Bare Below Elbow

Have you ever felt you had to comply by being bare below the elbows?

Percentage of respondents who felt compelled to comply by being bare below elbows



# Direct Quotes: Bare Below Elbow

- “I don’t feel comfortable telling seniors that I feel out of place having to wear sleeves above elbows when not in patient contact because to them it is such a small issue but for me it’s a big deal. I just comply/ there is no safe space to express how I truly feel because seniors will not understand”
- “I was once humiliated in front of the whole ward by a ward manager who would always single me out and almost bully me for my sleeves. She shouted at me on the third time and I burst out crying.”



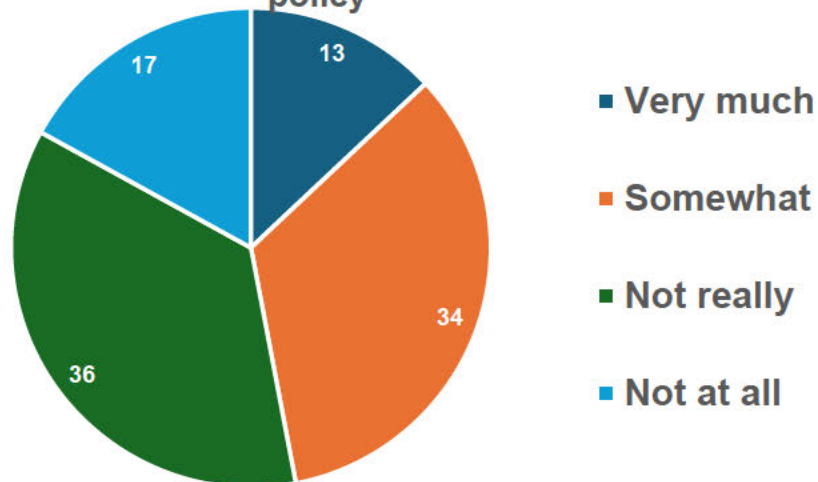
# Direct Quotes: Bare Below Elbow

- “I have been harassed by infection control nurses and kicked out of a ward by the ward manager or just had comments about lifting my sleeves by random nurses - all away from direct patient care”.
- “I feel that there is a barrier to us asking for sleeves as most of the time they are not available. Also a lot of the staff are unaware of our preference as Muslim women to wear sleeves so when we ask for them they are a little confused , which makes us less likely to carry on asking for sleeves and comply with the bare below they elbows rule, even when we feel uncomfortable doing so”.

# Results: Perception of treatment at work

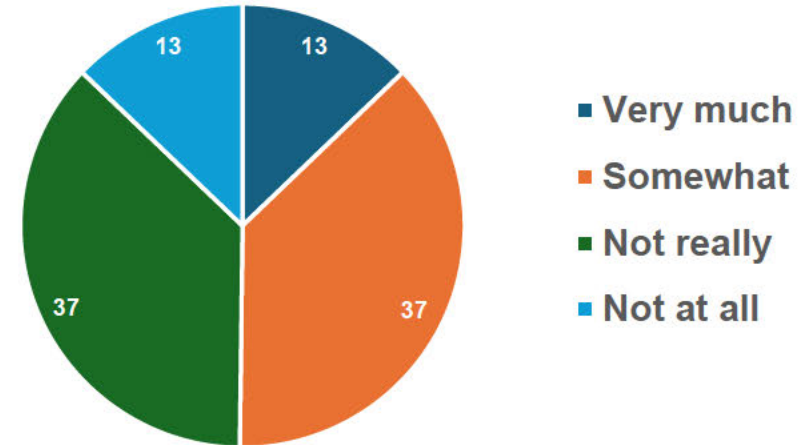
Do you feel you have been treated differently at work because of your trust's uniform policy?

Percentage of respondents who felt they have been treated differently due to trust's uniform policy



Do you feel you have been treated differently at work because of your faith?

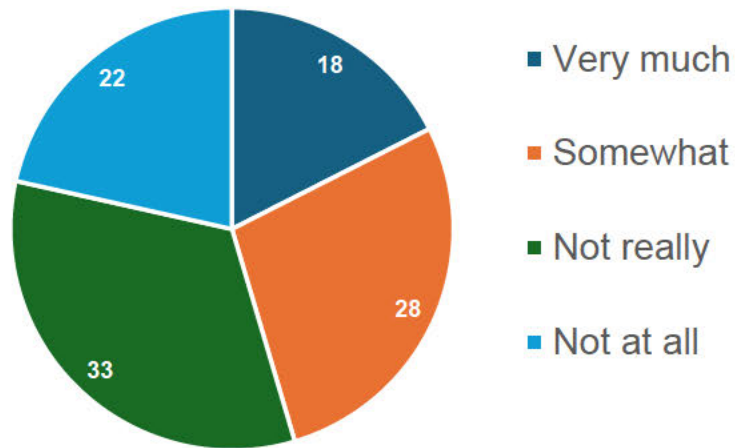
Percentage of respondents who have been treated differently at work because of their faith?



# Results: Impact on mental health

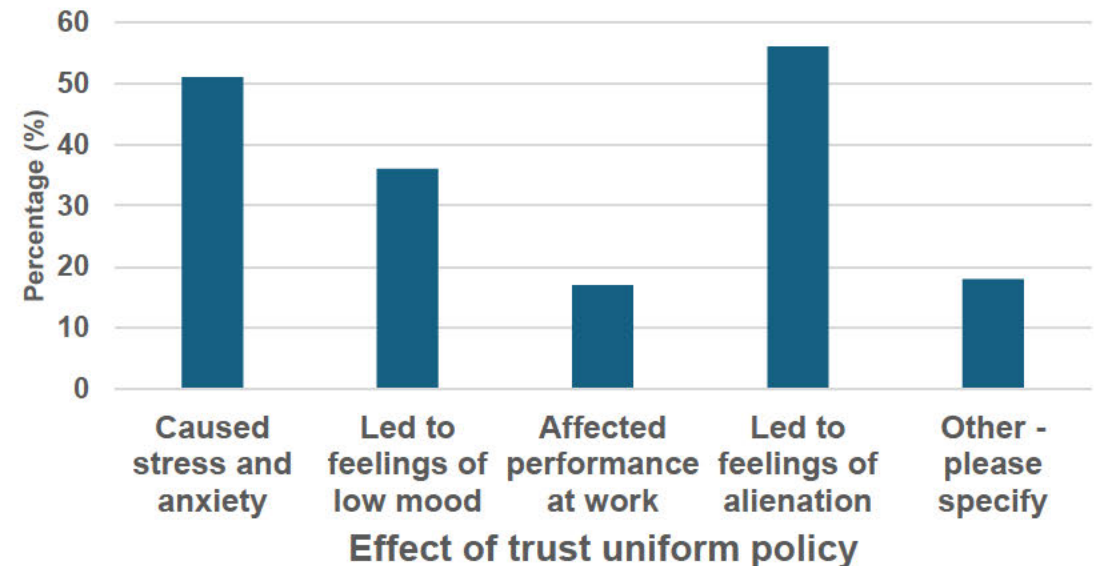
Do you feel your hospital uniform policy has ever affected your mental health?

Respondents who feel hospital uniform policy has ever affected their mental health



In what way do you feel your hospital uniform policy has ever affected your mental health?

How has your hospital uniform policy impacted you at work?



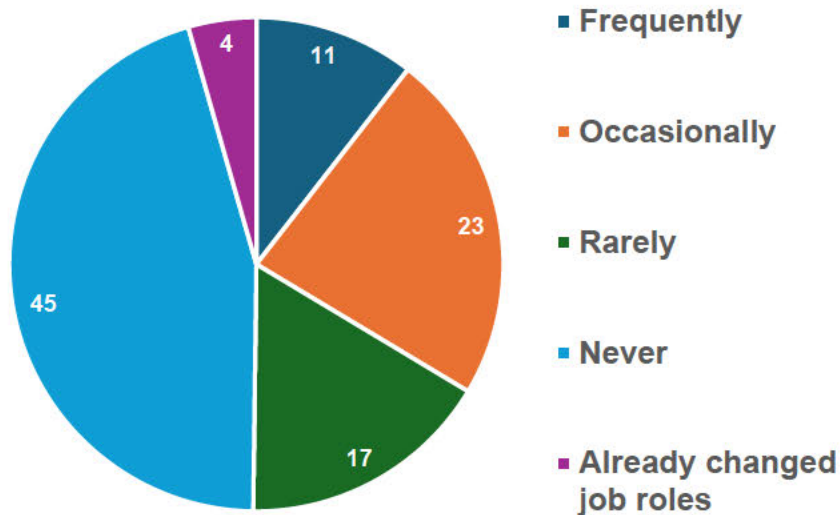
# Direct Quotes: Impact on mental health

- “It is difficult reconciling my faith which is so dear to me, with the profession I have always dreamed of entering into. It feels as though I have to compromise my religion in order to succeed and not be discriminated against in Medicine, which isn't a great feeling.”
- “Modesty is an important part of my identity and having to compromise it when there are other options available that might not be part of the trusts current policy is upsetting and when I have previously raised the issue it has been dismissed.”
- “As a medical student was very stressful trying to get sign offs whilst being prevented from entering theatre due to bare below elbow rule”
- “Contributes to a feeling of not belonging, especially and a muslim woman entering the surgical field, I am nervous about applying for trauma and orthopaedics because I will be singled out not just for my background but for how my values impact my decision to cover.”
- “Provided significant mental stress when already in stressful situations on the wards and on calls”
- “I considered quitting my training after 3-4 months of ongoing attitudes but once my TPD got involved, things changed dramatically.”

# Results: Effect on career choice

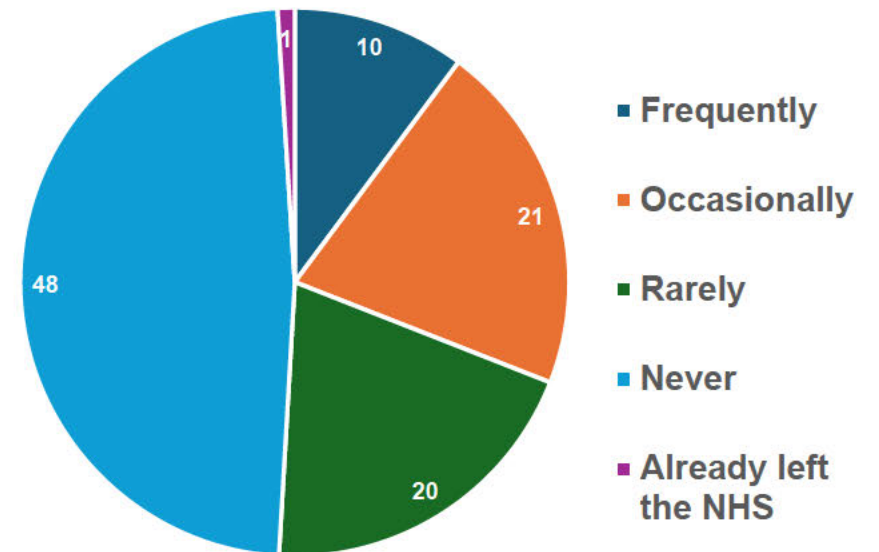
Have you ever considered changing job roles due to your hospital uniform policy?

Respondents who considered changing job roles due to hospital uniform policy



Have you ever considered leaving the NHS due to your hospital uniform policy?

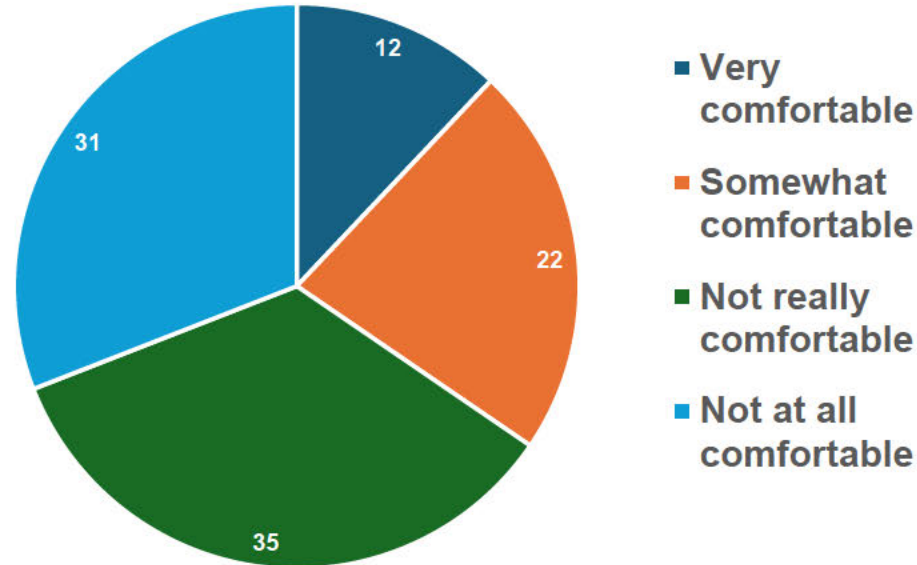
Respondents who have considered leaving the NHS due to their hospital uniform policy



# Results: Raising concerns

Do you feel comfortable raising any concerns about uniform policy with your supervisor or line manager?

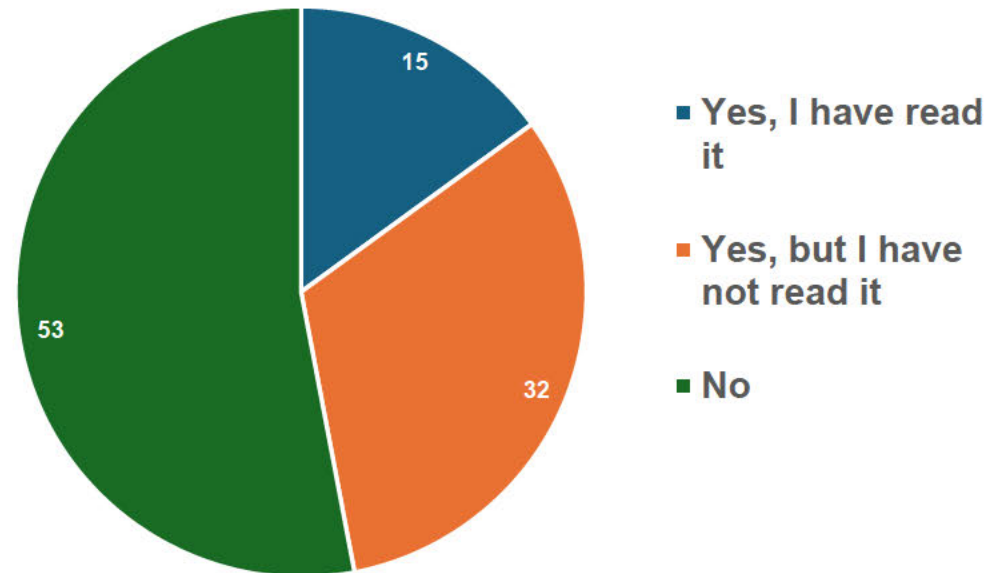
Respondents on how comfortable they feel raising any concerns about uniform policy with their supervisor or line manager?



# Results: Awareness of guidance

Are you aware there is a 2020 NHS England Uniform and Workwear guidance for staff?

Respondent awareness of the 2020 NHS England Uniform and Workwear guidance for staff



# What does this mean?

- Uniform policies continue to negatively impact Muslim female healthcare professionals
- Issues with uniform policies are severe enough for some Muslim women to affect their mental health and affect their career choices
- There is a lack of awareness of national uniform guidance



# Support for updating uniform policies

1. The national guidance is in our favour
2. The Equality Act 2010 states that organisations have to make reasonable adjustments for people with protected characteristics
3. Myself/ BIMA can provide support if required  
Please contact [women@britishima.org](mailto:women@britishima.org) [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

# Thank you for your attention



**LET'S OPEN TO THE  
AUDIENCE.**

**PLEASE SHARE YOUR  
THOUGHTS, COMMENTS AND  
EXPERIENCES!**



**ANY QUESTIONS ARE  
WELCOME**



**THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.**

Contact: [women@britishima.org](mailto:women@britishima.org)