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## In Afghan schools, black is the new black

By Mina Habib

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Mopping the perspiration from her face with a handkerchief, 16-year-old Marjan says her black school uniform makes the heat of the Kabul summer unbearable.

"The education minister is sitting in an air-conditioned office. What does he know about the conditions we're in, or how hot these black clothes get?" the seventh-grade pupil from the Ariana High School said. "We see girls fainting every day in the summer. The sole reason is that black makes your body temperature rise uncontrollably."

Schoolgirls and teachers are asking the government to change the regulations that stipulate a uniform consisting of a black dress, black trousers and white headscarf, even in provinces where summer temperatures can reach 50 degrees Celsius.

Shirin, a teacher at the Alem Faizzada High School, said blue or grey would make a far better choice. In her 12 years working as a teacher, she has seen numerous instances where girls have fainted from the heat.

"I was a pupil myself once. I've been through the same experience. I know how badly wearing black affects the pupils both physically and psychologically," she said.

Black and light green were traditionally the main options for schoolgirls, but now the former is usually required - a choice that also seems to be influenced by perceptions of sober modesty.

According to Abdol Monir Negah, who sits on the education ministry's academic council, "First, schoolgirls must be distinguishable from others. Secondly, black conceals the beauty and features of girls and women from the eyes of men. They don't attract attention."

He warned that any calls for change should take account of the conservative values of Afghan society.

Golalai, a dermatologist at Kabul's Central Hospital, says it is medical fact that black clothing absorbs more light and heat. "Several patients have come to me with skin reactions caused by black clothes," she said, adding that although medication could alleviate the symptoms, the real solution was to wear lighter-colored clothing.

As for school uniforms, she said, "I believe it would be better if black was changed to some other color."

Hilay, an eighth-grade student at the Ariana High School, is convinced that sombre colors affect one's mood.

"As well as making us feel hotter in warm weather, it's an unpleasant color. Women wear black when they go to mourning ceremonies. When I wear this uniform, I unconsciously think of funerals and grief, and that makes me think about my own death."

Temor, a mental health specialist at Kabul's psychiatric hospital, agreed that black had deep cultural meaning. "It's generally considered that black is the symbol of grief, disappointment and disaster. When a pupil puts on her black clothes, these perceptions are subconsciously reinforced and they have a negative impact on her studies," he said.

Education ministry officials say pupils should make formal representations if they want a change to school uniforms but warned that it would take time before consultations led to any change. Mohammad Azim Karbalai, chairman of the ministry's academic council, said new guidelines were being considered, and these might allow for more flexibility on color and design, on a region-by-region basis.

"We may refer the issue to parents and local residents so that they can decide about girls' uniforms in their own regions according to climatic conditions and social norms," he said, before warning that "there are other more important bills and regulations that we need to decide".

A pupil at the Aisha Durrani High School, who asked to remain anonymous, scoffed at the idea of consultations. "The education ministry takes decisions however it pleases," she said. "When have they ever asked students their opinion? Can't the minister see the problems we're facing?"