



GREENLAND

Coil scandal

The women who were forcibly fitted with IUDs

By *Miranda Bryant*

Victims left traumatised and infertile after birth control devices were inserted without consent by Danish doctors

Hedvig Frederiksen had been at her new school in Paamiut, Greenland, for only a couple of days when she was summoned from her dorm to hospital by a Danish caretaker.

She was 14 and had no idea what was going on. “But back then [1974], when a Danish person said something, their word was law, you had to listen to them,” said Frederiksen, at her

home in Nuuk, Greenland’s capital.

About a dozen girls went to the hospital. One by one they went into the doctor’s room and one by one they came out crying.

Frederiksen’s daughter Aviaja Fontain told the story as her mother quietly wept. “When she came in [to the doctor’s room], her memory just disappears and she thinks it’s because of the trauma ... Her friend from the same dorm said the doctor didn’t have a helper; he was alone putting spirals [contraceptive coils] inside girls.”

Frederiksen, now 63, is one of 143 Greenlandic women who last month announced they were suing the Danish state, demanding a collective payment of close to 43m Danish kroner (\$6.2m) for what they describe as a violation of their human rights.

They accuse Danish doctors of fitting girls as young as 12 with intra-uterine devices (IUDs) in an attempt to reduce the population of the former colony, now an autonomous Danish territory. It is believed that 4,500 women and girls were affected between 1966 and 1970, with many more procedures carried out without consent in subsequent decades, but it has taken a long time for the reports

to surface - and to be taken seriously.

The first Greenlandic woman to publicly accuse the Danish state of carrying out involuntary birth control was Naja Lyberth, who in 2017 wrote of her experiences on Facebook. She had been fitted with a coil when she was a teenager without her consent or that of her parents, she said. “The pain was indescribable,” she has said since.

However, it wasn’t until the release of a podcast series by the Danish public broadcaster DR that the issue started to gain political traction.

Greenland ceased being a Danish colony in 1953, although it did not have its own government and parliament until 1979. Healthcare and living conditions improved, life expectancy increased and the Greenlandic population grew. It was then that the Danish authorities are believed to have staged their drastic intervention. The programme of involuntary birth control would go on to halve the birthrate within a few years.

Last October, 67 women came forward to demand that the Danish state compensate them or face legal action, but the government did not act. Since then, the number of women - each seeking 300,000 Danish kroner (\$43,000) - has more than doubled.

The women are still waiting for a full response from Copenhagen, which has launched an investigation into birth control practices carried out by Danish authorities between 1960 and 1991 (Greenland was granted control of its health policy in 1992). The investigation is due to report in May 2025.

Denmark’s prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, visited Greenland last month with the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, to open a new office in Nuuk. She did not address the historical violation in



‘When a Danish person said something, their word was law’

▲ **Hedvig Frederiksen**

▲ An Inuit mother and girls wearing traditional dress in Qeqertarsuaq, Greenland

VERONIQUE DURRUTY/
GAMMA-RAPHO/GETTY

any official speeches during the visit.

The Danish health ministry said it had received a subpoena in the women's legal action and it declined to comment on the case. For Lyberth, now a prominent psychologist and campaigner, the result of the investigation cannot come soon enough. "We know 100% that we were subjected to human rights violations and that we were not asked and we did not give consent," she said.

Bula Larsen, who is also among the group who have sued the government, was 14 when the head of her dorm in Paamiut told her to go to hospital.

"At the hospital we were told to go into a room one by one and when it was my turn, I could see a Danish doctor with a white doctor's coat," said Larsen, who is now 65 and lives in Aarhus, Denmark. She said there was also a Greenlandic woman who helped him. She remembers the cold tools he used to insert the IUD, the shock she felt and "tremendous pain". She said he told her it was being fitted "so I shouldn't get pregnant". "I was only a child," she said. "I was only 14. And when I was back at the dorm I cried in the evening because I couldn't talk with my parents and I hadn't given any consent, nor did my parents."

Contraceptive coils are now a safe and effective form of birth control. But Larsen, like many of the women who have come forward since the 60s and 70s, went on to experience serious reproductive difficulties - a consequence, they say, of being forcibly fitted with unsophisticated devices that were too big for their young bodies.

Larsen was in so much pain that "afterwards I felt like I had shattered glass in my abdomen". Later, she got married and tried to get pregnant, but found she could not. Years later when she was examined at a hospital, they found her fallopian tubes were closed because of the coil, which had caused severe bleeding and left her sterile.

She was able to find joy in adopting her daughter, who is now 27. But the experience has left her with a deep mistrust of health authorities, a fear of doctors, and damaged self-esteem.

"It is so terrible that so many Greenlandic women and girls were assaulted and because of it they couldn't get pregnant and have a family," she said. "It is their right - no state should overrule me and the other women - our right to decide for our own body."

MIRANDA BRYANT IS THE GUARDIAN'S NORDIC CORRESPONDENT

► A mural of an Inuit woman and a polar bear in Nuuk, Greenland

EMIL HELMS/EPA



GREENLAND

Danish denial as minister is urged to 'get on a plane'

By Miranda Bryant

The Danish health minister should "get on a plane and visit" some of the thousands of women thought to be living with the consequences of being forcibly fitted with the contraceptive coil as children, Greenland's gender equality minister has said.

In an attempt to reduce the population of the former Danish colony, at least 4,500 women and girls are believed to have undergone the medical procedure, usually without their consent or knowledge, at the hands of Danish doctors between 1966 and 1970. The total number of those affected by the procedures, thought to have continued for decades, is understood to be far higher.

Victims and lawyers say generations of Inuit women were left traumatised and suffering reproductive complications, including infertility. Last month, a group of 143 women sued the Danish state over the alleged violations, but they have yet to receive a response from the government.

Now Naaja Nathanielsen, Greenland's minister for housing, infrastructure, minerals, justice and gender equality, has urged the Danish minister for health, Sophie Løhde, to

come and hear the stories of affected women - something she said Løhde has yet to do, despite several invitations.

"Really she should get on a plane and visit and talk to these women," Nathanielsen told the Guardian.

Denmark's reaction to the scandal - it will not report on its investigation until May 2025 - had been "slow-coming", she said, prompting Greenland to launch its own inquiry. The territory now controls its own legal system, police, home affairs and natural resources, even if Copenhagen controls foreign affairs and defence.

Nathanielsen intends to put forward a plan to the Greenlandic cabinet this month on conducting an investigation. The Danish ministry of the interior and health declined to comment on the fact that Løhde has not visited Greenland and said it was not aware of a Greenlandic investigation.

A spokesperson said: "The framework for the impartial investigation of the tragic matter referred to as the coil case has been agreed on and signed by the Greenlandic department of health and the ministry of the interior and health, and there has been full agreement on the commission between the Danish and Greenlandic government, Naalakkersuisut. The ministry has not received official information from the Greenlandic department of health that the government is starting its own investigation into the coil case."

Nathanielsen said the coil scandal - described by the UN special rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples as a "particularly" egregious part of the colonial legacy - had a broader historical context for Greenlanders.

"For us this story plays into the story about children being adopted without parental consent, about children being sent to Denmark, forgetting their language and their culture. It's about stories of Danish men coming to Greenland and fathering children that they then did not assume responsibility for," she said. "It's a part of this both colonial and postcolonial matter that is still very present in Greenland in our way of viewing our relationship with Denmark."

Nathanielsen said many organisations and politicians in Denmark were still having problems accepting the magnitude of what happened. "It's an injustice that was made and decisions that were made on behalf of other people that had real effects on their lives that were quite devastating," she said.

Out of control
Lasting effects of birth policy

4.5k

Women and girls believed to have undergone the procedure between 1966 and 1970

143

Number of Greenlandic women suing the Danish state

\$6.2m

Collective payment being demanded for what women describe as a violation of human rights