

Islamic Guidelines for Gender Interactions(part 1 of 2)

Description: This lesson focuses on the Islamic standards of modesty as it relates to gender interactions.

By Imam Mufti (© 2013 NewMuslims.com)

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Objectives:

- To learn the meaning of *ikhtilaat*.
- To develop an awareness of the issue of free-mixing between genders.
- To learn how the Prophet of Mercy controlled mixing between men and women in the mosque.

Arabic Terms:

- *Imaan* - faith, belief or conviction.
- *Ikhtilaat* - physical presence of men and women at one place.
- *Haya* - natural or inherent shyness and a sense of modesty.
- *Riba* - interest.
- *Mahram* - a person, man or woman related to a particular individual by blood, marriage or breastfeeding. One he or she is not permitted to marry, such as the father, nephew, uncle, etc
- *Masjid* - the Arabic term for mosque.
- *Sahabah* - the plural form of "Sahabi," which translates to Companions. A *sahabi*, as the word is commonly used today, is someone who met Prophet Muhammad, believed in him and died as a Muslim.
- *Sunnah* - The word Sunnah has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved of

Let us first discuss three preliminary points:

1. Modern society lacks guiding principles regarding morality.

A “virtue” is a moral standard which a society holds as something worthy to aspire towards. But in the modern world virtues change with time. Old virtues are questioned, new virtues are introduced. Moral standards once praised and valued are questioned and ridiculed today. Pre-marital relations and homosexuality would be two examples. Virtues are shaped and formed by one’s beliefs. As beliefs change, so do the virtues that society upholds.



2. The teachings of Islam are a port in the storm.

Islam is a port in the storm of moral degeneration and permissive attitude. Only by referring to genuine revelation - to Islam - can people determine what is right and what is wrong. Islam is a religion of unchanging ethics, morals and virtues such as honor, dignity, *haya* and respect. Referring to the Quran and *Sunnah* can save us from the chaos that surrounds us and the confusion that exists in so many minds.

3. In Islam certain things are more intensified than others.

In Islam, we find certain things that have been made easier and certain things have been intensified. We can generally say that one of the things that has been intensified is the rules of conduct between the sexes. Intoxicants and *riba* would be two other examples.

While Muslims and some non-Muslims embrace modesty as a virtue, is “modesty” culturally interpreted? In other words, is the standard of modesty different across cultural lines? Some aspects of modesty are clearly spelled out in the Quran and *Sunnah* that must be adhered to, whereas others are developed and practiced by Muslim culture in their own ways. Some are clear rules, whereas others are guidelines. Yet, some matters are products of the lands where Islam flourished.

The Arabic word *ikhtilaat* means ‘mixing,’ Islamically, it means unrelated men and women mixing, non-*mahram* men and women being physically at one place. It results in their meeting, conversing, and looking at each other.

What does Islam say about this?

The first point to understand is that every form of *ikhtilaat* is not forbidden. Some are permissible and some are forbidden.

When Muslim scholars caution against the “free” mixing of men and women, they are not talking about the mere presence of men and women together in the same place. This in of itself is not prohibited. Men and women gathered in the same place at the time of the

Prophet of Islam, for instance, in the mosque and in the marketplace. Men and women walked down the same roads and streets.

For instance, a Muslim woman is allowed to attend the mosque, even though it is mainly populated by men. So, it's a form of *ikhtilaat*, but the Prophet of Mercy gave guidelines on how to organize and structure it.

First, men are to pray in their own rows and women in their own. They do not stand next to one another.

Second, the men's rows are in the front and the women's rows are at the back so men's eyes won't fall on women during prayer.

Third, Prophet Muhammad declared that the best rows for men are the first ones, the worst are the rear most ones and the best rows for women are the rear most ones, and the worst are the first ones (Muslim). He said this to keep men and women separate when they are physically gathered in one place.

Fourth, the Prophet of Mercy made men wait until the women had left the mosque to prevent their crowding around the doors. Later, when the Muslim population increased, Prophet Muhammad designated a separate entrance for women. If you visit the Prophet's Mosque in Madina today, it is known as *Bab un-Nisa'* (The Women's Gate).

Keep in mind that these precautions were taken with people with the most perfect *imaan*, the purest hearts, and the best intentions, the *Sahabah*. Moreover, these measures were taken in the presence of the noble Prophet. Not only that, but the *Sahabah* were around him, and their respect for the Prophet is well known. More so, these steps were initiated in the Prophet's Mosque which Allah has honored and given special merit. Going even further, these precautions were during prayer in which one stands in front of his Master and is least likely to be distracted! Despite all that, these instructions from our beloved Prophet were taken to prevent enticement toward sin.

Whenever we talk about this issue, we should keep in mind the precautions taken by our beloved Prophet and weigh what we say and do in its light and judge how close or far we are from his guidance.

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