Respectable Interaction or Mixed Gathering

Introduction

The topic of “mixed gathering” has been a very controversial issue among the South Asian Shi‘as. Almost all Shi’a organizations and centers in the West, at one time or another, have gone through debates and discussions on “mixed gatherings”.

1. What is “Mixed Gathering”?

It is important to identify what is meant by “mixed gathering”. For the purpose of our paper, it means gathering of Muslim men and women with hijab without partition and/or without a designated area for either gender.

This paper does not deal with the Muslim gatherings where hijab is not practiced or enforced. It goes without saying that such “mixed gathering” where hijab is not observed or enforced is not acceptable from the Islamic point of view. Free and unrestricted interaction between those who are not mahram to one another is not permissible.

2. What is the Norm in Islam?

And so let us raise the question: When members of opposite gender step outside of their mahram circle, what should be their mode of behaviour?

The norm has been in Muslim societies that whenever there is a gathering of Muslims, especially of a religious nature, men and women are segregated either by designated separate space or by a barrier (i.e., curtain or partition). This norm can be traced back through the centuries to the lifestyles of the Imams and the Prophet of Islam (s.a.w.) themselves. For example, even though women came in hijab to the masjid for prayers, the Prophet preferred that at the time of leaving the mosque, the men stay behind so that the women can exit the mosque before the men. It was later on that a separate entrance was made for ladies.1

“Islam says neither imprisonment nor mixing, instead the sanctity [of hijab and decent interaction] is to be observed. This is the tradition of Muslims right from the days of the Messenger of Alla~h (s.a.w.) when women were not prevented from participation in the gatherings—of course, always preserving the climate of sanctity between the two sexes. “Women did not mix with men in the masa~jid or the gatherings, or even in the streets and alleys. Mixing of women with men in some gatherings, like the crowd observed in some of our

holy shrines, is indeed against the wishes of the Divine Law-Maker".2 Islam does not allow free mixing between members of opposite gender but it allows decent and sanctified interaction.

3. An Example from the Qur'an

The story of Prophet Musa and the daughters of Prophet Shu'ayb is a good guideline for us. After Musa fled Egypt and reached Madyan, the Qur'an (28:23-28) says:

And when he came to the watering well of Madyan, he found on it a group of men who were drawing water, and he saw besides them two women holding back their flocks.

He went to the two ladies and asked: "What is the matter with you that you are holding back your flock?" They said, "We cannot draw water until the shepherds move away with their sheep from the water well." Then as if to answer an unspoken question that 'why you, as ladies, are doing this job which should be done by the men in your family,' they continued: "and our father is a very old man so he cannot do this himself."

On realizing the modesty of the ladies who did not like to mingle with strange men, Musa offered to help them and he watered their sheep for them, and then went back to the shade for resting. Since he was hungry and tired, he prayed: "My Lord! Surely I stand in need of whatever good You may sent down to me."

When the two daughters of Shu'ayb went back home and narrated the incident, he asked one of them to call Musa so that he may thank him and pay him for the help.

Then, one of the two women came to him walking modestly. She said, "My father invites you so that he may recompense you with the wage of drawing water for us." She led the way. Musa said to her that let me go forward and you walk behind me and guide me from the back "because we of the household of prophets do not look at the back of women."

Once they reached to Shu'ayb's house, Musa narrated his problem of how he fled from Fir'awn. Shu'ayb said, "Do not be afraid, now you are safe from the unjust people."

One of the girls said, "O my father, since we do not have a young man in the family, employ him to work for you; surely the best person that you can employ is the one who is strong and trustworthy. This man has both qualities." Shu'ayb asked his daughter that "you know about his strength because he helped in watering the sheep but how do you know that he is also trustworthy?" She described how Musa asked to walk ahead of her; that reflected his modesty and chastity.

And so Prophet Shu'ayb then offered the hand of one of his daughters to Musa and they got married.3

We can easily deduce the following principles from this story:

• No free mixing and mingling of men and women who are not mahram to one another. According to the great jurist of the last century, Sayyid Ka~zim al-Yazdi, "Mingling of men and women is makruh."[4]

• Ladies may, whenever necessary, step outside of their homes and participate in the socio-political-economic spheres of society but it must be done with modesty (haya').

• Even in permissible interaction, haya' must be observed in talking to and inter-acting with a non-mahram person, as well as in controlling their glances towards non-mahram men or women.[5]

4. Acceptable Form of Mixed Gathering

In view of the above, let us see when is mixed gathering allowed? Or when is the removal of partition/barrier permissible? Whether a mixed gathering is proper or not depends on the purpose of the gathering:

• If the gathering is of a nature where segregation and/or partition do not defeat its purpose, then mixed gathering should not be encouraged.

• If the gathering is of a nature where segregation and/or partition will defeat its purpose, then mixed gathering is permissible with the condition of hija~b and decent behavior. Let us look at some examples: majlis/milad, lecture; madrasa/class, workshop, meeting, conference and seminar, marriage ceremonies and receptions.

Majlis & Milad:

Normally, the maja~lis are of monologue nature where the za~kir speaks and the audience listens. The purpose can be achieved with segregation and/or partitions between the two genders, and so I don't see any reason to remove the partition/barrier in majlis – more so in mila~d (celebrations) where men and women come dressed up with make up and cosmetics. (It is needless to remind that if a lady applies visible make up on her face, then she cannot show her face to the non-mahram, she will have to put a veil on her face.) In a segregated area, the women do not have to worry about hija~b, and can be relaxed and free in meeting one another.

Lecture:

Normally, at the end of the lecture, the audience is allowed the opportunity for interaction with the speaker in the question-answer session. In this kind of program, both genders should have

equal visual access to the speaker for them to participate in the question-answer session. Having a partition between men and women in the audience will not defeat the purpose and therefore I don't see any reason to remove the partition between the genders in the audience.

Madrasa & Classroom:

Teaching involves a lot of interaction between the teacher and the students, and also, sometimes, between the students themselves; and so having partition will hinder the purpose of such program. But then the teacher has to ensure that the boys are seated separately from the girls, and there should not be any indecent interaction between the two genders – neither in the classroom nor in the hallways. It is obvious that full hijab must be observed in such a setting; and the teachers/organizers are responsible to maintain the Islamic environment in such events.

It is worth mentioning that, according to a report presented in November 2004, a Richmond Hill public school (in Ontario, Canada) started a pilot-project of offering gender-separated classes. After three years' experiment, the teachers reported "more productive classes, greater student participation and higher grades in both genders." (Instead of blindly following others in name of 'progress' and 'modernization,' we should uphold our values and let the rest of the world catch up with us

Seminar & Workshop:

The nature of workshop involves interaction between the moderator and the participants as well as among the participants themselves. In such a gathering participants may interact with one another in a formal/professional manner with adherence to full hijab.

Conference & Committee Meeting:

.The same format as the workshop will apply here also

Marriage Ceremony & Reception:

In marriage ceremonies and receptions, people normally come dressed up, especially the women who use cosmetics and make up, and so any kind of mixing and mingling between members of opposite is not proper at all. Asking non-mahram men and women to sit at the same table in a wedding reception surely puts one into a situation of unlawful glance and the chances of improper mingling increases. Keeping the Islamic values in mind, the only decent

format, in a wedding reception, would be for the men and the women to be seated in segregated areas. (It has been observed that even when the card says 'Islamic dress code is mandatory,' there is no guarantee of enforcing it or ensuring that it is a proper hija~b. In such gatherings, the problem is not only bi-hija~bi, it is also bad-hija~bi.)

Wherever we have suggested that partition may be removed, it is absolutely necessary to observe the rules of hijab and decency: the ladies must observe full hijab covering the entire body (even the hair) with the exception of the face and hands.

Answered by the Grand Ayatullah Sistani in 1996/1416 about "supervised mixed gathering" of youths

The first three questions are about religious gatherings, debates, giving speeches, and presenting papers in "supervised mixed gatherings". Such activities are to some extent already taking place in most madrasas, debate and quiz programs, seminars and summer camp programs. To all these three questions, Ayatollah Sistani has given approval with certain very important conditions that should be carefully studied by the community leaders, youth groups, and madrasa organizers. (One of the conditions include the "complete hijab" and not just the "minimum hijab" as posed by the questioner in the preamble of the questions.)

The last question is about organizing supervised events or gatherings so that young men and women can "know each other through conversation and discussion" in order to encourage marriage among themselves. This the Grand Ayatollah Sistani has not permitted. In order to make sure this difference is seen clearly, the questions and answers are presented side-by-side:

Q.1 Is it permissible to organise religious and educational gatherings in which young men and women will participate with observance or Islamic rules of interaction [that is, without ant intention of lust and without any threat of corrupting morality? Let it be clear that such a program will be organized under supervision of parents and sympathetic persons.

Answer:

No objections, provided:

[a] girls observe the Islamic hijab completely;

[b] girls sit separately from boys;

[c] both sexes should observe the respect and dignity in character, conversation and dress in such a way that they never put themselves in any sinful or corrupt situation.

It is highly recommended that in the beginning of such gatherings a religious scholar, with sound reputation and Islamic behaviour should exhort the audience explaining to them the harms of abandoning the Islamic laws.

Q.2 Can young men and women in such gatherings exchange views and discuss issues in the form of debate and argument? Answer: If the topic is from religious point of view, an appropriate subject for discussion and exchange of views between the boys and girls and if what has been mentioned in the previous answer is observed, then there is no objection.

Q.3 Can young men and women in such gatherings which has been organized specifically for them give speech and present papers on religious and educational topics for each other? Answer: With the observation of the conditions already stated, there is no objection. Q.4 In order to encourage these youths to get married among themselves so that their religious interests will be preserved, is it permissible to organize activities under the supervision of the parents and sympathetic religious persons to allow them to know each other through conversation and discussion?

:Answer: No objection, provided

Their knowing each other is attainable through the activities mentioned in other questions. In answer to the last question, Ayatullah Sistani has clearly not allowed activities specifically organized to facilitate the youths to know one another for the purpose of marriage. Unlike the first three answers, he does not say “it is permissible or there is no objection” in this answer. By saying that “their knowing one another is attainable through the activities mentioned in other questions,” the Ayatullah has indicated that if “knowing one another” takes place incidentally through other activities, then it is okay. But to organize a gathering with that specific purpose in .mind has not been approved by Ayatullah Sistani

Notes

1- Mutahhari, Mas’alatu ’l-Hijab, Arabic translation by al-Khalili (Tehran: al-Bi‘tha, 1407) p. 246.

2- Mutahhari, Mas’alatu ’l-Hijab, p. 243. The statement “the crowd observed in some of our holy shrines” refers to the pre-revolutionary era of Iran when the area around the actual shrines was not segregated but now there is screen separating the men from the women.

3- An Explanatory Translation of the Qur’an, vol.

4. Please note that the words in italics are explanatory remarks added to clarify the meaning.

5- Al-Yazdi, S. Ka~zim, al-‘Urwatu ’l-Wuthqa, vol. 2 (Beirut: Mu’assasa al-A‘lami, 1988/1409) p. 805 with annotations from all the contemporary mujtahideen and none of them have written

any dissenting remarks on this view. The fatwa of Sayyid al-Yazdi is based on the reliable hadith narrated by Ghiyath bin Ibrahim from Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.) who said, “Amiru ’l-Mu’mineen (a.s.) said, ‘O People of Iraq! I have been informed that your women rub shoulders with men on the streets – do not you feel ashamed?’ (al-Hurr al-‘Amili, Wasa’ilu ’sh-Shi‘ah, vol. 14, p. 174.)

Also see the transcript of the late Ayatullah al-Khu’i’s lectures by Muhammad Taqi al-Khu’I, Mabani ’l-‘Urwati ’l-Wuthqa, vol. 1, p. 115; Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim, Mustamsaku ’l-‘Urwah, vol. 14 (Qum: Makbatu ’l-Mar‘ashi, 1404) p. 54-55. 5Also see verse 24:30-31.