

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

A question on working with non-Mahram women

Ustādh Abu Eesa Niamatullah

This was what I wrote in response to a comment on another thread, but after I wrote it, it was so long that I thought it'd be better up here instead. So there you go.

Asslamo 'alaikum Sheikh,

First of all, my apologies but this isn't going to be a joke, so I'm sorry

Wa 'alaykum salam wa rahmatullah.

Is this what they call a "thread killer"? 😊

I want to make a request that the question I put to the sheikh is not turned into a joke...

Hey, I was just kidding! 😊

Q: what are the lines around which we can/should interact with people of the opposite sex at work?

Let me give you a few general points that hopefully cover your various scenarios mentioned above.

Firstly, we have to recognise that there are two worlds out there for the practising Muslim in the UK/West. The first is the working world/environment and the second is the non-working environment.

Taking the second first: this kind of life for the practising Muslim in the UK is just a piece of cake. Peace, stability, no stress, and no areas of risk and danger with respect to working in doubtful areas such as haram commodities, *riba*, isolation with the opposite sex etc. Sure, you might not get a true experience of the country's people - there's only so much you can learn from meeting the mums at the school run, speaking to the checkout girl/bloke when shopping, discussing with the electrician when he comes

round and taking round food for the neighbours every once in a while - but for the one desiring safety over *da'wah*, then he/she couldn't get it better.

Even the Muslim studying in the Educational system is largely protected from problems due to various legislations and due to the freedoms found in higher education and the fact that one's livelihood is not *directly* under threat although admittedly, we start to experience a few difficulties.

So the real challenge to Muslims in the UK/West is to be found when they start work. Here, you can't just do as you wish or demand what you want because you are under contract, you're the one in need and the employers are the ones who are in power with their own interests to pursue.

This is all important to note because this uneven relationship creates a state of relative weakness for the practising Muslim as one's livelihood is on the line: this thereby enacts a few *usuli* principles that allow insha'Allāh small areas of doubt to be "overlooked" which help every single one of us who are involved in our wider societies. Of course, this is based on the general understanding that Muslims are meant to be living all around the world in all types of communities and societies, often in non-Islamic environments, and thus to simply "move away to the Muslim Lands" is a mantra which is more suited to Wonderland as opposed to the reality millions of us find ourselves in today, and Allāh knows best.

Let me mention a few things that are permissible intrinsically but become doubtful because of other factors: working with non-mahram women is permissible, speaking to non-mahram women is permissible, being in the company of more than one woman is permissible, being polite and initiating conversation and asking about other women without being asked first is permissible, etc.

But as always, the presence of carnal desires and the fear of *fitnah* make give all the above actions a different legal status to their status quo.

So we see various factors and realities that make things less straight-forward: for example the state of undress of all the women we work with. Normally that is unacceptable. But what else can we do other than restrict ourselves to our houses for the rest of our lives? How can we avoid that when we spend our entire day walking around with pictures of non-*mahram* women in our pockets - yes, all those British Sterling notes (and no, the Queen's crown isn't a suitable hijab). Now before you laugh, this is a valid point. You wouldn't have normally thought about that as an issue but from a *fiqhi* point of view, this is entirely unacceptable but we know that it'd be

impossible to live in the wider world if we didn't regretfully overlook all these various nuances of secular dominated 21st Century life today.

Likewise the gaze - in principle we don't look at a woman directly more than once but when put in a position when having to work with someone or advising a patient/customer or delegating jobs, it simply isn't possible to keep avoiding looking at a woman without unfortunate consequences. It is for this reason that some of the *Fuqaha'* mentioned the different type of "look" that exists between the sexes of which there is immense detail. Needless to say, the scholars allowed repeated looks as part and parcel of business or the completion of the transaction as per necessary on the condition that there is safety from falling into *fitnah* or inflaming one's sexual desires.

An important note here is to realise that the path of caution which you yourself are taking is the correct and blessed one. Unfortunately there are an increasing number of Muslims today in the West that simply ridicule such caution or even the methodological approach to determining what is permissible by itself and then what becomes permissible due to a need. Such people make simple blanket statements like "if you want to live in the West, this is the score" or "go and live in a cave then!" etc, not realising the ignorance and indeed danger of making such dismissive statements about the importance of sticking to *Shari'ah* as much as possible in our lives.

The key then to remember is to avoid all possible doubtful issues and then to minimise as much as possible all other areas of possible *haram*.

With these principles in mind, let me put them into practice and just give a few direct answers to your questions:

- At work, never isolate yourself with a member of the opposite sex. At the very least, if you have to be in a room or an office, try and keep the door open at all times. If you have the choice to arrange meetings or appointments then plan in advance and ensure open areas, a third person present, or a room which has much window space etc. And when there is no choice, then fear Allāh as much as you can and minimise the time that you are in that isolated state.

- Try to minimise conversation with the opposite sex. That doesn't mean stop asking about them, helping them, talking about yesterday's TV etc. It just means don't initiate meaningless chat, don't let the conversation go to difficult places, don't drop your guard when talking freely and also, don't become a zombie or a non-responsive stiff so as to invite suspicion and feelings of insult which I have seen in the workplace too from a few Muslims.

Making *dhikr* at work is very useful because people tend to think you're busy and leave you alone. Making the *du'a* of the workplace to help you in the battle against Shaytan is a must of course. Yet your *dhikr* should not prevent you conversing with your work colleagues, even if there is no immediate need or it is pure general conversation. But the good thing is that your colleagues will soon start to see you as a serious person who doesn't just talk for fun but will be there for them if they need company or quality conversation.

Basically, don't flirt about at work or try and be the women's favourite who is the "life of the party" and yet at the same time, don't make yourself into that unsocial difficult person who doesn't care about anything. And yes, it would definitely be bad *da'wah* if you "locked them off". As always, balance is the solution.

- These rulings do indeed differ when there is no *fitnah*, but the definition of that is not left up to you to decide! Things like general conversation as mentioned above is fine anyway and is from good manners and *da'wah*.

The problem comes about when some people say "there is no *fitnah*" because they might think that their female colleague looks pretty average (or less even!) or that they are some Superman who doesn't care for women in the slightest, or even more unlikely, his wife waiting at home would put Claudia Schiffer to shame. Those who have experience in the workplace will tell you that *fitnah* is **not** in the eye of the beholder but rather a reality that cannot be defined and protected against easily and thus taking the safe option of minimising free contact is the best and most beloved to Allāh.

And anyway, what kind of argument is "she's not pretty at all, she's no *fitnah*" anyway?! What about the other way round and the fact that could be proving to be a *fitnah* for her? Who said women didn't have desires, however unattractive/religious/scary you may look with your beard and all the rest of it. Think Salman Rushdie. Exactly.

- Your final question about going out for lunch or any special events etc is one of the more difficult realities of working life today. Muslims are not people who wish to intentionally frequent eateries where *haram* food is served, alcohol is present on the premises, women are exhibiting various levels of nakedness and illicit music is pumping away. Now technically speaking, one could argue that as long as one doesn't eat *haram* food, one doesn't eat with alcohol on their table, women are everywhere and we can't do too much about it and being in a place where there is music and you *hearing* it is not the same as *listening* to it - well, that'd be a fair argument.

You might also hear from the same people that these things are “*mudrikun la mahala*” (as in the famous *hadith* of the adultery of the limbs) i.e. that such things and potential *haram* moments will definitely happen whatever happens. But when we look at it as a package then there is no doubt that the practising Muslim is not to be found chilling out in such areas.

With this in mind, we need to try and avoid such invitations. But on the odd occasion, especially when our non-Muslim colleagues go so far out of their way to choose locations without alcohol and *halal* food etc (and the Muslim mustn't feel too guilty about this kind of arrangement, indeed insisting on such conditions will decrease the number of times such events will occur!) then as long as all the obvious *haram* aspects are avoided such as *haram* food, alcohol, isolation of the sexes etc then to attend is not a major issue insha'Allāh. If you have a good relationship with your colleagues, this will certainly help. Taking myself for example, I will tell my friends clearly that I'm not interested in Christmas dinners and the like but I'll get out with them later in the year. And they better not be coming all tarted up otherwise there'll be trouble. My colleagues actually know that if the women come in dresses and the like, they'll get blasted for the evening and the next two months after as well. But then few people are strong enough in character to pull such lines off so again, it's all about minimising the *haram*, fearing Allāh as much as possible and presenting as much Islamic decorum as possible.

And Allāh knows best.

I also want to briefly mention something about women in the workplace: I am an absolute extremist in this issue in that I don't have any time for the opposing arguments. Women should not be in the workplace whatsoever. Full stop. Yes we need women doctors and dentists and all the rest of it but there'll always be Muslim women who'll go ahead and do that anyway, whatever the scholars tell them so let them go ahead. As for the rest of the practising Muslimat: after 17 years of experience in the workplace, I simply cannot imagine how we will safeguard our Islamic identity in the future and build strong Muslim communities in the West with women wanting to go out and becoming employed in the hell that it is out there. I don't feel the need to offer any explanation. That's just the way it is. I've seen far too many families split up, childrens' lives ruined and ones Islamic development curtailed for myself to ever support women being outside the family home more than they already are.

The irony of my statement is not lost upon me, especially if I tell you that from an interaction point of view, it is much better to be a Muslim woman in the workplace

than a Muslim man. The male cannot look at the woman other than her face and hands for some given need. The female on the other hand is allowed with the same given need to look at everything below the knees and above the navel of the man as per the most correct opinion of the scholars. So you tell me: how do you avoid looking at the hair of your female colleague compared to your Muslim sister working with men in their normal state? There is no comparison.

Yet despite this fact, the warnings of our scholars have been actualised and the new generation of Muslims in the West are throwing away their future at a time ironically when the UK's leading family judges are looking desperately to cultures like ours to save the family breakdown which is all too common to the native citizens who have been obsessed in getting women into the workplace.

Whether you agree with me or not my dear sisters, the success of building a Qur'anic generation from our children is almost completely dependent on the mothers educating themselves as much as humanly possible on the Qur'an and Sunnah before marriage, and then utter devotion to them after marriage. Call me old-fashioned, bigotted, extremist, backward and whatever else you want for now, as long as you also call me "honest" in 20 years time when you realise the truth.

There is so much that I could talk about here but then it'd just turn into a very long and legal discussion. I'll be very honest and say that the *Fuqaha'* have gone into enough detail with respect to the interaction between the non-related sexes that a fatwa can be found for most of the things you mention. But as the *Salihin* have always asserted, it should be *taqwah* instead of *fatwah* that governs our day-to-day lives.

We ask Allāh *jalla wa 'ala* to protect us all in these testing times, and give us the *taqwah* and *tawfiq* to practise this great favour of Islam in the very best way possible, *ameen*.