

# ‘Female Speakers?’

## Let’s examine the Fiqh

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Summary of talk given online on this subject on Friday 26<sup>th</sup> April 2024

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### Is a woman’s voice ‘awrah?

To say a woman’s voice is ‘awrah has serious implications.

Anybody who says a woman’s voice is ‘awrah, this opinion is rejected, **false**, *fasid* and **against the Qur’an and Sunnah**.

The definition of ‘awrah encompasses:

- A blemish one may wish to hide due to feeling embarrassed
- Nakedness one feels ashamed to show
- Blameworthiness

Arguing that the voice of a woman is ‘awrah implies that her voice exposes her nakedness. This is impractical and impossible to put into practice as we engage in public spaces.

There is no single decisive, clearcut *qat’i* text in the Qur’an or from the Sunnah to say that the voice of a woman is ‘awrah. Actually, quite the opposite.

Interpretation or *ijtihad* must be done in line with the maqasid shari’ah and the ‘ada/culture of our times.

**The founders of all the madha’ib as well as Ibn Hazm agree that the voice of a woman is not ‘awrah. It was a few later scholars that deemed the voice of a woman to be ‘awrah.**

### Evidence that the voice is not ‘awrah:

يٰۤاَيُّهَا نِسَاءَ النَّبِيِّ لَسْتُنَّ كَأَحَدٍ مِّنَ النِّسَاءِ ۗ اِنْ اَتَقَيْتُنَّ فَلَا تَحْضَعْنَ بِالْقَوْلِ فَيَطْمَعَ الَّذِي فِي قَلْبِهِ مَرَضٌ وَقُلْنَ قَوْلًا مَّعْرُوفًا

**“WIVES OF THE PROPHET, YOU ARE NOT LIKE ANY OTHER WOMEN. IF YOU ARE TRULY MINDFUL OF GOD, DO NOT MAKE YOUR SPEECH SUGGESTIVE IN CASE THE SICK AT HEART SHOULD LUST AFTER YOU, BUT SPEAK IN AN APPROPRIATE AND NORMAL MANNER (AND CONTENT)”**

**(QUR’AN 33:32)**

Some scholars said that a woman should change her voice to make it more like a man. However, this contradicts the hadith of Rasool (saw) wherein he mentions the curse upon the women who imitate men and vice versa.

- The Qur’anic verse above mentions **not making speech suggestive**. The reference is to ‘*speech/qawl*’ and not the ‘*sawt/voice*’ hence referring more to the **content and manner** of speech.
- **The inference is to not be sexually suggestive in speech.**
- The one who has disease in their hearts includes men who see women as sexual objects.
- Notice the command to our Mothers (RA) in the latter part of the verse; “but **speak as normal and about all that is good and acceptable/ma’roof**.” This is an order to speak!

A’isha (RA) instructed and taught male and female companions (from behind a screen). This verse clarifies for us all to be speaking *ma’roof* or what is acceptable and good. For example, A’isha (RA) asked about Bilal (RA’s) health when he became unwell in Medina. What is *ma’roof* would preclude futile and sexually suggestive talk.

Imam Al Ghazali said that the voice of the woman is not ‘awrah. The women at the time of the Sahabah continued to speak to men; whether to offer salam, respond to salam, ask for a fatwa or to take advice/*mushwara*...

We have been instructed to return salam with an equal or better response; regardless of gender:

“And when you are greeted with a greeting, greet with a better (greeting) than it or return it; surely Allah takes account of all things.”

(QUR’AN 4:86)

Female speakers who offer their wisdom and reflections on Islam, Muslim issues, public benefit etc... their speech would be included in what is *ma’roof*.

### Disease of the Heart

Where some men have a problem with the voice of a woman, it is possible that they may have a disease of the heart that needs to be resolved. It is also possible that an individual man may be affected with desire by an individual female speaking. In such a case, a man can get up and leave a gathering; as opposed to making it an obligation to follow a false opinion that forbids female speakers.

It must be noted that such an opinion would preclude a man from listening to female teachers, lecturers, speaking to females in shops etc... The Muslim woman speaking on Islamic issues is more praiseworthy than hearing the voices of women in public spaces which we are all exposed to, e.g. shops etc...

## What about gender mixing?

The companions of Rasool (saw) lived in a mixed society and our Prophet (saw's) mosque was one with no screen separating the genders; men prayed in front and women behind. We have reports of female companions asking male companions sitting just in front of them about parts of an address they had not heard.

Some social media speakers have commented that Muslim male and female speakers sharing a stage is **haram** as it may lead to adultery or fornication.

The 'ulama would be **very careful using the term haram** where there is *ikhtilaf/ijtihad*. For example, the student of Abu Hanifa, Abu Yusuf said that he met scholars and people of knowledge who disliked that they say that 'this is halal or this is haram' except that which is **clear and directly mentioned in the Book of Allah**, without the need for tafseer. The best they would say would be 'I don't like it.'

Some Islamic organisation argue that they do not allow female speakers in case haram may result. However, Allah has already set limits for us and no further limits need to be added by people:

- وَلَا تَقْرُبُوا الزَّوْجَىٰ إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَاحِشَةً ۖ وَسَاءَ سَبِيلًا  
“Do not approach zina/adultery for it is an outrageous act and an evil way”  
(Qur'an 17:32)
- Do not be alone in *khalwa*; a private situation between 2 people of the opposite gender who are non-mahram
- Inappropriate behaviour such as that mentioned in the Qur'anic and Sunnah as follows:

الَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبِيرَ الْإِثْمِ وَالْفَوَاحِشَ إِلَّا اللَّمَمَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ وَاسِعُ الْمَغْفِرَةِ

“As for those who avoid grave sins and foul acts, though **they may commit small sins (lamam)**, your Lord is ample in forgiveness...”

(QUR'AN 53: 32)

In explaining **lamam** from the Quran, Abdullah ibn 'Abbas said “I find nothing better that explained lamam than what Abu Huraira reported from the Prophet (saw).” Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) saying:

“Indeed Allah has written for every child of Adam (person) their share of fornication that he or she will partake of inevitably. The adultery of the eye is the lustful look and the adultery of the ears is listening to voluptuous (song or talk) and the adultery of the tongue is licentious speech and the adultery of the hand is the lustful grip (embrace) and the adultery of the feet is to walk (to the place) where he intends to commit adultery and the heart yearns and desires. The privates either carry it out or avoid it.”

(Sahih Bukhari and Muslim)

The zina here is counted as **lamam** or small sin, e.g. the zina of the eyes/the look, the zina of the tongue/the speech, the heart desiring zina and the private parts either confirm or reject the zina. So long as actual zina is not fallen into and is rejected, the aforementioned are the **lamam** referred to in Qur'an 53:32. We should try to avoid the desirous look/talk etc, as much as we are able, but we will all feel and have unwanted feelings and thoughts.

Brazen and sexually suggestive speech (as referenced in Qur'an 33:32 above) would be included in zina of the tongue.

## Can we look at the faces of female speakers?

“Tell the believing men to avoid desirous gazing and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what they do.

And tell the believing women to avoid desirous gazing and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment **except that which (necessarily) appears thereof** and to draw (a portion of) their head covers over their cleavages...”

(SURAH NUR: 30-31)

- First, the believing men are instructed to control ‘**from** their gaze.’ All gaze is not what is meant here... but that we should control ‘from the gaze.’ ‘*Min*’ (from) indicates that **it is a type of gaze that is not allowed**. The adultery of the eyes is the look of sexual desire.
- **By far the majority of scholars agree that the face and hands of a woman do not need to be covered** and are referenced by ‘except that which (necessarily) appears thereof.’

Abu Hanifa, Imam Malik, Imam Shafi'i and their followers as well as Abu Thawr, Al Awza'i, Ibn Hazm and al- Tabari all agreed that the face and hands of a female can be shown. The companions Abdullah Ibn 'Umar and Abdullah Ibn 'Abbas (RA) also agreed with this opinion.

Ahmed ibn Hanbal in one opinion agrees with this and, in another opinion, argued that gloves should be worn but that the face can be shown.

**There is no harm in looking at the faces of female speakers so long as it is without desire.**

## What if the female speaker does not cover her head?

It is obligatory for the Muslim woman to cover her head.

However, to not cover the head is a smaller sin and **not to be equated** with nakedness of the private parts.

Whether a Muslimah covers her head or not is **between her and Allah**. If she is speaking, it is better for the Muslim male to lower his gaze or leave, **should this be problematic for him**.

However, **it is unacceptable** to introduce a fatwa that a female speaker should not be speaking publicly.

We should not generalise that a woman who does not cover her head should not be invited to speak. These are case by case decisions to be made. Bear in mind that non-Muslim female speakers are not required by our shariah to cover their heads when they speak publicly.

## How should we challenge restrictive practices in Muslim organisations?

Social media personalities promoting puritanical teachings on Youtube are problematic. We must be critical and careful which scholars we chose to follow. Part of following a legal ruling is to decide who we choose to follow.

In Islam, everything is *mubah*/permitted and that which is forbidden amounts to just a handful of rulings.

Islam came to make things **easy** and our Rasool (saw) was a Mercy to Creation.

Abu Huraira (RA) reported:

The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “Verily, **this religion is easy**, and **no one goes to extremes in the religion except that it ruins them**. Follow the right course, seek closeness to Allah, give glad tidings, and seek help for worship in the morning and evening and a part of the night.”

(Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 39)

Female speakers should be invited for their contributions, expertise and benefit as opposed to worrying about desirous thoughts. Such thoughts can **also be felt by a female audience with male speakers**.

Muslim women who attend organisational spaces e.g. Islamic Societies without head coverings need to be **welcomed to learn and partake in Islamic activities**. As humans, we **all** sin and should all be preoccupied with making *tawbah* (asking for forgiveness) to Our Lord - rather than considering our Islamic organisational spaces completely sinless and hence turning females away; whether they be Muslim or not.