2198 - When is it permissible for a woman to uncover her face?

the question

We know that the most correct opinion among the scholars is that women should cover their faces, but there are many situations where women cannot cover their faces. Could you shed more light on this topic?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

The most correct opinion, which is supported by evidence, is that it is obligatory to cover the face, therefore young women are forbidden to uncover their faces in front of non-mahram men in order to avoid any mischief, and they should certainly do so when there is fear of fitnah (temptation).

On this basis, the fuqaha' stated that in certain situations, women are permitted to uncover their faces in front of non-mahram men when it is necessary to do so, and it is permitted for those men to look at them, provided that this do not go beyond the bounds of what is necessary, because what is permitted on the grounds of necessity should not be exaggerated.

These special situations may be summed up as follows:

I – Proposal of marriage

It is permitted for a woman to uncover her face and hands in front of a man who wants to propose to her, so that he may see them, without being alone with her and without touching her, because the face gives an indication of ugliness or beauty, and the hands give an indication of whether the body is slender or plump (which in turn gives an impression about fertility).

Abu'l-Faraj al-Maqdisi said: "The scholars do not differ as to the permissibility of looking at the face… the focal point of beauty, the place one looks at…"

Many ahaadeeth indicate that it is permissible for a man to look at the woman to whom he is proposing marriage. Among them are the following:

1. Sahl ibn Sa’d (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “A woman came to the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and said, ‘O Messenger of Allah, I came to give myself to you in marriage.’ So the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) looked at her, he raised his gaze and stared at her, then he lowered his head. When the woman saw that he had not made any decision, she sat down. Then a man from among his Companions stood up and said, ‘O Messenger of Allah, if you don’t want to marry her, then marry her to me.’ …”

(Reported by al-Bukhaari, 7/19; Muslim, 4/143; An-Nasa'i bi Sharh al-Suyooti, 6/113; al-Bayhaqi, 7/84).

Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “I was with the Prophet , and a man came to him and told him that he had married a woman of the Ansaar. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, ‘Have you looked at her?’ He said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Go and look at her, for there is something in the eyes of the Ansaar.’”

(Reported by Ahmad, 2/286, 299; Muslim, 4/142; An-Nasa'i, 2/73).

Jaabir (may Allah be pleased with him) reported that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “When any one of you proposes marriage to a woman, if he can look at that which will encourage him to go ahead and marry her, let him do so.”

(Reported by Abu Dawood and al-Haakim. Its isnaad is hasan, and there is corroborating evidence in the hadeeth of Muhammad ibn Muslimah. It was classed as saheeh by Ibn Hibbaan and al-Haakim. It was also reported by Ahmad and Ibn Maajah, and by Ahmad and al-Bazzaar from the hadeeth of Abu Humayd. Fath al-Baari, 9/181).

Al-Zayla’i said: “It is not permissible for him to touch her face or hands – even if he feels that no desire will be aroused by doing so – because it is haraam and there is no need to do so.” In Durar

al-Bihaar it says: “It is not permissible for the qaadi, the witnesses or the groom to touch her, even if they feel that no desire will be aroused by doing so, because there is no need for that.”

(Radd al-Muhtaar ‘ala’l-Durr al-Mukhtaar, 5/237).

Ibn Qudaamah said: “It is not permitted for him to be alone with her because she is still forbidden for him, and only a look is permitted, therefore being alone with her remains haraam, because there is no guarantee that he will not do something haraam if he is alone with her. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “No man is alone with a [non-mahram] woman but the Shaytaan is the third one present with them.” He should not look at her in a lustful or suspicious manner. Ahmad said, according to a report narrated by Saalih: “He should look at the face, and he should not look in a lustful manner.”

The man may look at her repeatedly, checking her features, because the desired aim cannot be achieved in any other way.”

II – Business dealings

It is permitted for a woman to uncover her face and hands when buying or selling, and it is permitted for the vendor to see her face when he hands over the goods and asks for the money, provided that this will not lead to fitnah – otherwise it is forbidden.

Ibn Qudaamah said: “If a person deals with a woman when selling or renting, he may look at her face so he knows who she is, and may go back to her when the money is due (a guarantee of the price when the deal is finalized). It was reported that Ahmad said this was makrooh in the case of a young woman, but not in the case of an old woman, and in the case where there is fear of fitnah, or where there is no need for this business deal. But in cases where it is necessary, and there is no wrongful desire, then there is no harm in it.”

(al-Mughni, 7/459; al-Sharh al-Kabeer ‘ala Matan al-Muqni’, 7/348 bi Haamish al-Mughni; al-Hidaayah ma’a Takmilat Fath al-Qadeer, 10/24).

Al-Dasooqi said: “ When testimony is given concerning a woman who wears niqaab (face-veil), she

has to remove her niqaab. This applies in the case of marriage and other matters, such as selling, giving gifts, debts, power of attorney, and so on. This is the opinion favoured by our shaykh."

(Haashiyat al-Dasooqi 'ala'l-Sharh al-Kabeer, 4/194).

III – Medical treatment

A woman is permitted to uncover the site of her illness whether it is on her face or elsewhere on her body, for a male doctor to treat her, on the condition that her husband or mahram is present, and if she cannot find a female doctor. It is less serious for her to be seen by a doctor of the same sex, and she should not be seen by a non-Muslim doctor if a Muslim doctor is available. Also, she should not uncover more than the site of the problem.

It is not permissible for the doctor to look at or touch more than is necessary, because the issue is one of necessity and should not be exaggerated.

Ibn Qudaamah said: "it is permissible for the doctor to look at whatever is necessary of her body, of her private parts and elsewhere, because there is a need for it to be uncovered.

It was reported that a boy who had stolen something was brought to 'Uthmaan. He said, 'Look at his groin (to see if he had pubic hair, which would indicate whether he had reached the age of puberty [and would therefore be considered to be a responsible adult] or not).' They did not find any pubic hair, so they did not cut off his hand."

(Al-Mughni, 7/459; Ghidha' al-Albaab, 1/97).

Ibn 'Aabideen said: "He said in al-Jawharah: if the illness is in any part of her body apart from her private part, it is permitted (for the doctor) to look at it in order to treat it, because it is the matter of necessity. If the sickness is in her private part, he (the doctor) should teach a woman how to treat it. If there is nobody who can do that, and they fear that she may die or suffer unbearably, then they should cover all of her body except the site of the sickness, then a man may treat her, but he should avoid looking at her as much as he can, and look only at the site of the sickness that he is treating."

(Radd al-Muhtaar, 5/237. See also, al-Hidaayah al-‘Alaa’iyah, p. 245).

A similar ruling applies to one who is taking care of a sick person, even if it is someone of the opposite sex, when helping the patient with wudoo’ or istinja’ (washing the private parts after using the toilet).

(See Ghidha’ al-Albaab, 1/97).

Muhammad Fu’aad said: “What indicates that it is permissible for a man to treat a woman – within the restrictions mentioned above – is the report narrated by Imaam al-Bukhaari with his isnaad from al-Rabee’ bint Mu’awwadh, who said: “We used to go out on military campaigns with the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). We would bring water to the people and serve them, and bring the dead and wounded back to Madeenah.”

(Reported by al-Bukhaari, 6/80, 10/136. Fath al-Baari. A similar report was narrated from Anas by Muslim, 5/196; Abu Dawood, 7/205 ma’a ‘Awn al-Ma’bood; and al-Tirmidhi, 5/301-302, who said this is hasan saheeh)

Al-Bukhaari included this hadeeth under the chapter heading Baab hal yudaawi’l-rajul ul-mar’ah wa’l-mar’at ul-rajul? (Chapter: can a man treat a woman or a woman a man?).

(Fath al-Baari, 10/136).

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar said: “The ruling that a man may treat a woman was derived from this by analogy; he (al-Bukhaari) did not confirm that, because it is possible that this referred to the time before hijaab was made obligatory, or that women used to take care of their husbands or mahrams on military campaigns. The ruling is that it is permissible for women to treat non-mahram men in cases of necessity, with as little looking and touching as possible.”

(Fath al-Baari, 10/136)

IV – Testimony

It is permissible for a woman to uncover her face when she is giving testimony in court, whether

she is a witness in a case or is there to witness a deal, and it is permissible for the qaadi (judge) to look at her in order to know who she is and to protect the rights of all concerned.

Shaykh al-Dardeer said: “It is not permitted to give testimony against a woman in niqaab until she uncovers her face so that it may be known who she is and what she looks like.”

(Al-Sharh al-Kabeer li’l- Shaykh al-Dardeer, 4/194)

Ibn Qudaamah said: “The witness may look at the face of the woman against whom he is testifying so that his testimony will speak about her in specific terms. Ahmad said: ‘He cannot testify against a woman unless he knows who she is.’”

(Al-Mughni, 7/459; al-Sharh al-Kabeer ‘ala Matan al-Muqni’, 7/348, bi haamish al-Mughni; al-Hidaayah ma’a Takmilat Fath al-Qadeer, 10/26).

V – In court cases

It is permissible for a woman to uncover her face in front of a qaadi (judge) who is to rule either in her favour or against her, and in this situation he may look at her face in order to know who she is and for the sake of protecting people’s rights.

The same rules that apply to giving testimony or bearing witness also apply in court cases, because they serve the same purpose.

(See Al-Durar al-Mukhtaar, 5/237; Al-Hadiyah al-‘Alaa’iyah, p. 244; Al-Hadiyah ma’a Takmilat Fath al-Qadeer, 10/26).

VI – In front of mature boys who feel no physical desire

It is permissible – according to one of the two reports – for a woman to show in front of a mature boy who feels no physical desire what she shows in front of her mahrams, because he has no interest in women, and it is permissible for him to see all that.

Shaykh Abu’l-Faraj al-Maqdisi said: “The mature boy who feels no physical desire may see parts of

a woman’s body above the navel and below the knee, according to one of the two reports, because Allah says (interpretation of the meanings): ‘… there is no sin on you or on them to move about, - attending (helping) you each other…’ [al-Noor 24:58] and ‘And when the children among you come to puberty, then let them (also) ask for permission, as those senior to them (in age)…’ [al-Noor 24:59]. This indicates that there is a differentiation between those who have reached puberty and those who have not.”

Abu ‘Abd-Allah said: “Abu Tayyibah did cupping for the wives of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) when he was a boy.”

It was also reported that he said: “He is like the ajnabi (stranger, i.e., non-mahram), because he is like one who has reached puberty in the matter of physical desires, and this means that hijaab is required and it is forbidden to look. Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): ‘… small children who have no sense of the shame of sex…’ [al-Noor 24:31]. As for small boys who are not mature, it is not necessary to cover in front of them at all.”

(Al-Sharh al-Kabeer ‘ala Matan al-Muqni’, 7/349. See also Al-Mughni, 7/458 and Ghada’ al-Albaab, 1/97).

VII – The man who has no desire

It is permissible for a woman to show in front of a man who has no desire what she can show in front of her mahrams, because he has no interest in women, and he is allowed to see all of that. Ibn Qudaamah said: “Whoever no longer feels any desire, because of old age, impotence or incurable illness, or because he is a eunuch, … or a mukhannath (the effeminate man or a man who has female hormones) who feels no desire, the ruling that applies to such a man is the same as the ruling that applies to mahrams regarding looking at women, because Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): ‘… or old male servants who lack vigour…’ [al-Noor 24:31], i.e., those who feel no desire for women.” Ibn ‘Abbaas said: “This is the one of whom women do not feel shy.” He also said: “This is the mukhannath who is impotent (i.e., cannot have an erection).”

It was reported that Mujaahid and Qutaadah said: “This is the one who has no interest in women,

but if he is a mukhannath who feels desire and knows about women, then the rules that apply to others apply also to him, because ‘Aa’ishah said: ‘A mukhannath entered upon the wives of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), and they used to think that he was a man who felt no physical desires, but the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) entered upon us when this man was describing a woman and saying ‘When she comes in, she comes on four, and when she goes out, she goes on eight.’ The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: ‘Do I not see that this man knows who is here? This one should never enter upon you.’ And he was kept away after that.” (Reported by Abu Dawood and others).

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr said: “The mukhannath is not only the one who is known to be promiscuous. The mukhannath is the one who looks so much like a woman physically that he resembles women in his softness, speech, appearance, accent and thinking. If he is like this, he would have no desire for women and he would not notice anything about them. This is one of those who have no interest in women who were permitted to enter upon women. Do you not see that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) did not prevent that mukhannath from entering upon his wives at first, but when he heard him describing the daughter of Ghaylaan and realized that he knew about women, he commanded that he should be kept away.”

(Al-Mughni, 7/463; al-Sharh al-Kabeer ‘ala Matan al-Muqni’, 7/347-348).

IX – Old women who are past marriageable age

Old women who are past marriageable age may uncover their faces and what usually appears in front of non-mahram men, but it is still better for them to remain covered.

Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): “And as for women past child-bearing who do not expect wedlock, it is no sin on them if they discard their (outer) clothing in such a way as not to show their adornment. But to refrain (i.e., not to discard their outer clothing) is better for them…” [al-Noor 24:60]. Ibn Qudaamah said: “In the case of old women who are past marriageable age, there is nothing wrong if they show what ordinarily appears, because Allah says (interpretation of the meaning), ‘And as for women past child-bearing who do not expect wedlock…’ [al-Noor

24:60].” Ibn ‘Abbaas said concerning the aayahs (interpretation of the meanings), “Tell the believing men to lower their gaze…” [al-Noor 24:30] and “Tell the believing women to lower their gaze…” [al-Noor 24:31]: “Old women who no longer expect to get married were exempted from this. The same exemption also applied to women who are deformed and are not desirable.”

(Al-Mughni, 7/463; al-Sharh al-Kabeer ‘ala Matan al-Muqni’, 7/347-348).

X – Uncovering the face in front of kaafir women

The scholars have differed concerning how a Muslim woman should appear in front of kaafir women.

Ibn Qudaamah said: “The ruling concerning women dealing with women is the same as that concerning men dealing with men. There is no difference between Muslims, and no difference between a Muslim woman and a dhimmi (non-Muslim living under Muslim rule) woman, just as there is no difference between two Muslim men or between a Muslim man and a dhimmi man when it comes to seeing. Ahmad said: ‘Some people think that she should not take off her head covering in front of a Jewish or Christian woman. However, I think that she (a Jewish or Christian woman) should not see the private part (of a Muslim woman), or attend her when she gives birth (i.e., she should not be her midwife, because she will look at the most private part of her body when she gives birth – except in cases of necessity, as discussed above).’”

Another opinion was reported from Ahmad, according to which a Muslim woman should not remove her niqaab in front of a dhimmi woman, because Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): “… or their women …” [al-Noor 24:31]. But the first opinion is more correct, because kaafir women, Jewish and others, used to enter upon the wives of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), and they did not wear hijaab in front of them nor were they commanded to do so. ‘Aa’ishah said that a Jewish woman used to come and talk to her, saying “May Allah save you from the punishment of the grave,” and she [‘Aa’ishah] asked the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)… Asma’ said, “My mother came to me, and she had no desire to become Muslim. I asked the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah

be upon him), ‘Should I uphold the ties of kinship with her?’ and he said, ‘Yes.’”

Moreover, hijaab between men and women serves a purpose that is not an issue in the case of a Muslim woman and a dhimmi woman, just as it is not an issue in the case of a Muslim man and a dhimmi man. Hijaab is obligatory when there is a text stating that it is so or the obligation may be understood by analogy; in the case of a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim woman, there is neither text nor analogy.

The aayah “… or their women …” [al-Noor 24:31] could refer to all women.

(Al-Mughni, 7/464; al-Sharh al-Kabeer ‘ala Matan al-Muqni’, 7/351 bi haamish al-Mughni).

Ibn al-‘Arabi al-Maaliki said: “The correct view, in my opinion, is that this permissible in the case of all women, and that it appears with the pronoun (-hinna = their) to match the rest of the aayah. This is the aayah of pronouns, where the pronoun -hinna appears twenty-five times; there is nothing else like it in the Qur’aan. So this word matches the others.”

(Ahkaam al-Qur’aan, 3/326).

Al-Aloosi said: “Al-Fakhr al-Raazi suggested that the dhimmi woman is like the Muslim woman, and he said: “The correct opinion is that she (the dhimmi woman) is like the Muslim woman, and ‘their women’ means all women. The opinion of the salaf (early generations of Islam) should be understood on the basis that (covering in front of non-Muslim women) is preferable, but it is not obligatory.” Then he said: “This view is easier for people today, for Muslim woman can hardly observe hijaab in front of dhimmi women.”

(Tafseer al-Aloosi, 19/143).

Muhammad Fu’aad said: “If this opinion was easier in their time, then no doubt it is more appropriate and easier in our own time, especially for those women who, because of circumstances beyond their control, find that they have to live in non-Muslim countries, where they mix with non-Muslim women and their lives are interwoven with theirs, to the extent that observing hijaab in front of them is fraught with difficulties. Truly, to Allah we belong, and truly, to

Him we shall return.”

XI – Hajj and ‘Umrah

Women must uncover their faces and hands when they enter ihraam for Hajj or ‘Umrah. At this time, they are forbidden to wear niqaab and gloves, because the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “The woman who is in ihraam must not wear niqaab or gloves.”

If a woman needs to cover her face because men are passing close by her, or she is beautiful and is sure that men are looking at her, she should drop a part of head covering over her face, because of the hadeeth of ‘Aa’ishah in which she said, “Riders were passing by us, and we were in ihraam with the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), so when they came near, each of us would lower her jilbaab over her face, and when they went away we would uncover our faces again.”

Al-Juzayri said, reporting from them: “A woman may cover her face for a necessary reason, such as non-mahram men passing close by her, and the fact that (the cloth) will touch her face does not matter. This is to make it easy and alleviate hardship.”

(Al-Fiqh ‘ala’l-Madhaahib al-Arba’ah, 1/645).

These are situations in which it is acceptable for a woman to uncover her face and hands, explained in detail by the fuqaha’ and scholars. But there is one other situation which deserves our attention, and that is when a Muslim woman is forced to uncover her face – what is the ruling in this case?

XII – Compulsion

Some oppressive regimes have instituted harsh laws which go against the religion of Islam and rebel against Allah and His Messenger. These laws prevent Muslim women from wearing proper hijaab, and some of them even remove their niqaab by force and subject them to the worst type of oppression and persecution.

Women who wear niqaab have been subjected to harassment in certain European countries, where they have been subjected to harm, and Islam and the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) have been slandered.

Therefore, when a woman is certain that she is likely to be subjected to unbearable harassment, she is permitted to uncover her face. It is better to follow a scholarly opinion which is less correct than to expose herself to trouble at the hands of evil men.

If a woman is permitted to uncover her face and hands in the situations described above, which do not involve force or harassment, then surely it is more likely that she is permitted to uncover them when she is faced with a threat to herself and her religion, especially when her niqaab may expose her to tormentors who may pull the hijaab from her head or subject her to worse abuse. In cases of necessity, things that are ordinarily forbidden are permitted, within the limits of what is strictly necessary, as the scholars have stated, but this should not lead one to take the matter of covering the face lightly. Each woman must evaluate the situation in which she is living and learn from her own experience and that of others, so that she will be sure of what is a case of real necessity, as opposed to her own whims and weaknesses.

Although women are permitted to uncover their faces and hands in the exceptional situations described above, they are not permitted to wear make-up and visible jewellery if they do so. It is forbidden for them to display these things in front of non-mahram men, according to all the fuqaha', because Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): "… and not to show off their adornment…" [al-Noor 24:31], and because there is no need to do so.

(Hijaab al-Muslimah bayna Intihaal wa Ta'weel al-Jaahileen, p. 239).

We ask Allah to reform the Muslims. May Allah bless our Prophet Muhammad.