

CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER OF WOMEN

Q: 8-? Are women allowed to participate in congregational prayer led by a male? If it is allowed where they should stand? Similarly is it allowed for women to arrange their own congregational prayer led by a female and participated by women exclusively? If it is allowed, what shall be the arrangement of the rows? Please also mention whether such type of congregational prayer can be held in the mosque or in the home. If it is possible for women to participate in a congregational prayer held in a mosque, how should a woman observe the injunctions relating to Hijab?

(Muhammad Hassan Chand, Karachi)

A: The Holy Prophet has clarified in a number of Ahadith that it is not preferable for a woman to perform prayer outside her home. The congregational prayer has been intended for the male Muslims only and they are not only included to perform their prayers in a congregation but it has been made almost obligatory on them that they should perform the prayer in a mosque and should not abandon the congregational prayer except in a case of necessity. On the contrary, the females are always advised by the Holy Prophet to perform their prayers in their homes so much so that the performance of prayer in an inner room has been made more rewardable for a woman than in the outside room, and performing the prayer in the outside room has been more rewardable for her than in a courtyard of her own house. However, in the days of the Holy Prophet saw. a large number of women used to come to the Mosque to perform prayer behind the Holy Prophets: an unparalleled merit. Since the women of those days used to observe all the requirements of Shari'ah including those of Hijab in the days of the Holy Prophets, they were not forbidden from attending the congregational prayers. However, the Holy Prophet saw. has made it clear that it is more advisable for them to pray in their homes.

But Sayyidna `Umar rdi, felt in his days that the concession given to the women is sometimes misused and it was apprehended that it would be misused in the future even more. He was also aware of the fact that the Holy Prophet saw. did not like the women leaving their homes for the sake of prayers. Keeping all this in view he issued a directive that the women should no longer attend the congregational prayer. This directive was completely confirmed by all the Companions of the Holy Prophet saw. available at that time. Sayyida A'isha opined, that had the Holy Prophets been alive in those days he would have certainly stopped the women from attending the mosque for prayers.

It is in this context that the Muslims jurists have been unanimous on the point that it is not advisable for women to attend the congregational prayers in a mosque, rather most of them have taken it as a prohibited act.

At the same time it should be kept in mind that even though the participation of women in a congregational prayer is not advisable according to the Shariah, yet, if they join a congregation at some occasion, the prayer will be valid. In this case, they have to stand behind the rows of the males and the Imam should have the intention that he is leading both males and females in prayer.'

Similarly, the congregation of females only is held to be `Makrooh' by the Muslim jurists. However, if at some occasion, the women elect to arrange their own congregation led by women, the female Imam should stand in the centre of the first row and not in front of the followers as the male Imam is supposed to do. As mentioned earlier, it is not advisable for women to pray in the mosques. However, if they elect to do so, their prayers will be valid according to the Shari'ah. In any case, the observance of Hijab while joining a male congregation is mandatory which cannot be dispensed with in anyway.

I hope that this will satisfy your question. I would like to emphasise once again that the basic purpose of a Muslim, male or female, should be to follow the dictates of Shari'ah and to seek the pleasure of Allah and not to satisfy one's own desire. The congregation of the male Muslims has been held as a meritorious act for the simple reason that Allah Almighty has declared it meritorious for the males but the case of women is totally different. Here, the Messenger of Allah has expressly mentioned that it is more meritorious for a woman to perform prayers in her home. Therefore, Muslim women should not insist on going to the mosque for joining the congregational prayers because the reward promised for a congregational prayer shall be available for them in their homes and not in the mosque.

Contemporary fatawaa