

Defining Boundaries for Brother and Sister Organizers and Participants

Introduction

Being followers of the Holy Qur'an and Ahlul Bayt [a], we have firm belief in limited interaction between males and females who are not related. Limited in the sense that unnecessary interaction should be avoided and necessary interaction should follow certain rules.

Allah [swt] says the Holy Qur'an,

"Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments ...and turn to Allah all of you, O believers, so that you may be successful." [Sura-tul-Noor (24), Verses 30-31]

The sixth imam, Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq [a] relates that the Holy Prophet [s] said, *"The women should have naught to do with the middle of the path, rather its perimeter."* (Al-Furoo' min al-Kafi, vol. 5, pg. 519) The word 'path' (*tareeq*) refers to paths such as streets and walkways. What the Holy Prophet [s] is saying is that women should not walk in the middle of the paths, rather they should walk on the sides, thereby preventing themselves from becoming the focus of attention and limiting the interaction between opposite genders in the streets and walkways.

The verse from the Holy Qur'an and this tradition from the Holy Prophet [s] are simply meant to be samples of what we are taught from both sources about interaction between males and females. Unfortunately many times, following these teachings and maintaining proper interaction between genders becomes quite a challenge. This is especially true in a mixed-gender youth organization (an organization whose volunteers consist of both brothers and sisters). In such a group, not only are genders mixing, but the organizers and participants are youths. This is not a safe combination at all.

It is, however, important to keep in mind that having both brothers and sisters involved in the leadership keeps an organization balanced and representative of diverse views. This necessity can create complications if you're not careful. This section will attempt to give some guidelines and pointers for defining boundaries and controlling interaction between brother and sister organizers and event participants.



Within the Organization

Meetings:

Objective: Eliminate unnecessary distractions (caused by the mixed-gender environment) so as to keep the focus of the group on the discussion at hand.

Helpful Tips:

- Have the brothers sit separately from the sisters.
- Do not let the brothers and sisters sit facing each other at relatively close distance. For instance, if the meeting is being held at a table, have the brothers sit at one end of the table and the sisters at the other end, instead of the brothers sitting facing the sisters across the shorter width of the table.
- Keep the discussions serious and formal. Humor is always healthy, especially in a team environment, but it should be pertinent and limited if possible.

Distribution of Tasks

After projects are distributed and responsibilities are handed out, those individuals working together on a project or having same/related tasks will typically be communicating with each other more than with others.

Objective: Avoid, as much as possible, both brothers and sisters working on one task or project. You must do so, however, without compromising the task (certain people have talents that may be needed for tasks). If it's necessary to have brothers and sisters working together, make sure they are mature and responsible people.

Helpful Tips:

- Give those tasks relating to sisters to the sisters in the organization, and those tasks relating to the brothers to the brothers.
- In the case of projects or tasks that relate to both genders, divide sub-tasks between brothers and sisters so as to minimize the communication and interaction between both genders.

Example #1: If the task is to plan a brothers' basketball tournament, obviously this should be undertaken by the brothers.

Example #2: You want to organize a banquet to recognize the youths with the best academic performance in your community. You decide to assign this to a mixed-gender group. Within the group, distribute the tasks separately between the genders. For instance, let the sisters take care of food, tickets, and advertising. Let the brothers take care of program, venue, and finances.



Intra-organization/Intra-team Communication

Efficient communication is vital to the success of a project, organization of an event, or other activities carried out by your organization. Communication is most efficient and effective when the two parties understand each other, avoid withholding important information, and are serious about the task at hand.

Objective: Limit and try to control communication between brothers and sisters—who are working on the same task—inside and outside of meeting and team environments.

Helpful Tips:

- Encourage and emphasize proper *hijab* and *akhlaq* among organizers. The leaders must practice this and serve as role models for the rest of the volunteers and members of the organization. In addition, this must be a set standard of the organization.
- Appoint two individuals—one from the brothers and one from the sisters—who will communicate with each other on behalf of the rest. Choose the ones you are most comfortable with.

Example: Continuing with the banquet example: have the sisters report to one sister and the brothers to one brother, and have that sister and that brother communicate/coordinate with each other on behalf of the rest. Make sure to choose these two individuals wisely.

Events and Activities

In general, youth organizations focus all or most of their energies on activities that involve social interaction. Examples include a fundraising BBQ, a rock-climbing outing, a camping trip, and a lecture series. All events and activities organized by your group can fall into one of two categories: single-gender or mixed-gender.

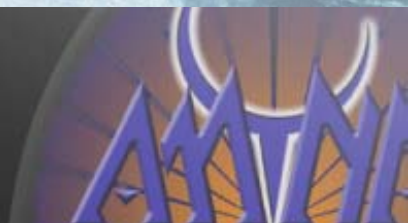
Single-gender

Single-gender events or activities focus on only one gender rather than catering to both. Obviously with a single-gender event, it is usually not very difficult to control interaction between brothers and sisters.

Objective: Keep single-gender events single-gender.

Helpful Tips:

- Everyone involved in the activity or event should be of the same gender. This includes volunteers, organizers, participants and attendees.
- Only allow the targeted gender to enter the premises or venue of the event.
- Only advertise the event or activity to the targeted gender.



Example: In the case of a brothers' basketball tournament, not only should all the volunteers and participants be male, but all the spectators should be male.

Mixed-gender

Gender interaction at these types of events—where the targeted group includes brothers and sisters—is more complex, and many times difficult to control, than at single-gender events.

Objective: Eliminate or minimize unnecessary interaction between brothers and sisters.

Don'ts:

- Never let brothers and sisters sit together (i.e. mixed); they must be segregated in the seating arrangement.
- Never sit the brothers and sisters facing each other.

Helpful Tips:

- When advertising, indicate that Islamic dress code will be in effect at the function.
- Build a reputation for your organization that includes steadfastness when it comes to avoiding unnecessary gender interaction.
- If possible (and if not detrimental to the type of event), have a physical barrier between the brothers and sisters.
- If there is no physical barrier between the brothers and sisters, do not sit them side-by-side. Instead, let the brothers sit in front of the sisters.
- Depending on the type of event and the age/maturity of attendees and participants, you may want to control or prevent pre or post-event intermingling between the brothers and sisters.

Example: Back to the banquet example... The gathering includes both brothers and sisters and you have separated the seating side-by-side with no physical barrier in between. The least you can do is make sure that the gap between them is wide, and that there is no interaction before and after the program and during breaks. So if there is a dinner buffet, don't put the brothers' and sisters' buffets close to each other, rather separate them as much as possible.

Conclusion

Please be wise and sensible when defining boundaries between brother and sister organizers and event participants. Your approach must take into consideration two very significant issues:



- The laws of Allah [swt] and the commands and advices of the Holy Qur'an and Ahlul Bayt [a].
- Your community and its culture, history, weaknesses, and strengths.

By knowing your community and where it stands with respect to *hijab* and interaction between opposite genders, you can implement the laws of Allah [swt] accordingly. Interaction between genders varies from community to community, and the solution in one community may not necessarily be the solution for all. The ultimate goal for us all should not only be to ensure that the basic laws of *hijab* are observed, but to bring about an environment that reflects the *akhlaq* and demeanor taught by the Holy Qur'an and Ahlul Bayt [a].

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