12371 - Wearing revealing and short clothes, and the limits of women’s ‘awrah in front of other women

the question

It is becoming common for some women to wear short and tight clothes which show off their charms and which may be sleeveless or show the chest or back, so that the woman is virtually naked. When we try to advise them, they say that they only wear these clothes in front of other women, and that the ‘awrah of a woman in front of other women is the area from the navel to the knee. What is the ruling of Islam, in your opinion, with evidence from the Qur’aan and Sunnah, on this matter and on wearing these kind of clothes in front of mahrams? May Allaah reward you with good on behalf of the Muslims, men and women, and make your reward great.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

In response to this it might be said that it is reported in a saheeh hadeeth that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said:

“There are two types of the people of Hell whom I have not seen yet. People with whips like the tails of cattle, with which they strike the people, and women who are clothed yet naked, walking with an enticing gait. They will not enter Paradise nor even smell its fragrance, although its fragrance may be detected from such and such a distance.”

The scholars interpret “clothed yet naked” as referring to women who wear tight clothes or light clothing that does not cover what is beneath it, or short clothes. Shaykh al-Islam (Ibn Taymiyah) mentioned that what women wore inside their houses at the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) covered everything from the heel of the foot up to the palm of the hand. All of this was covered when they were inside the house, and when they went out to the market, it was known that the women of the Sahaabah used to wear loose garments which would

drag along the ground. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) allowed them to let it trail up to a cubit, but no more than that.

With regards to the doubts that some women have, concerning the words of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), “Let no woman look at the ‘awrah of another woman and let no man look at the ‘awrah of another man; the ‘awrah of a woman in front of another woman is from the navel to the knee”, which they interpret as indicating that women may wear short clothes – the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) did not say that it is sufficient for women’s clothing to cover the area from the navel to the knee, so this cannot be used as evidence. What he did say was that no woman should look at the ‘awrah of another woman, so he forbade them to look, because the ‘awrah of the woman who is wearing loose clothing may sometimes be exposed when answering the call of nature or for some other reason, so the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) forbade women to look at one another’s ‘awrahs.

Because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said that no man should look at the ‘awrah of another man, does this means that the Sahaabah wore izaars (waist wrappers) or trousers only between the navel and the knee? Does anyone think that women can go to meet other women wearing nothing but clothes that cover her from the navel to the knee? No one would say such a thing. That only happens among the kaafir women. The confusion that some women feel has no basis; what some women understand from this hadeeth is not correct. The meaning of the hadeeth is clear. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) did not say that women's clothing should cover only the area between the navel and the knee. Women have to fear Allaah and feel that sense of modesty which is part of the nature of women and which is part of faith, as the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Modesty is a branch of faith.” And it is said in the proverbial sense, “more shy than the virgin in her seclusion.” It was not even known among the women of the jaahiliyyah to cover only the area from the navel to the knee, such a thing was not known among either women or men; do these women want the Muslim women to be even worse in appearance than the women of the jaahiliyyah?

In conclusion: the clothing is one thing and looking at the ‘awrah is another thing. With regard to

clothing and what a woman wears in front of other women, it is prescribed for her to cover everything from the palm of the hand to the heel of the foot, but if a woman needs to pull up her dress in order to do some work etc., she may pull it up to her knees, and if she needs to roll up her sleeves to the upper arms she may do that too, if she only does it as much as is necessary. But if this is the way she usually dresses, then that is not allowed. The hadeeth does not indicate this under any circumstances at all, hence it addresses the one who is looking, not the one who is looked at. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) was not referring to how women should dress; all he was referring to was the ‘awrah. He did not say that women’s dress may cover only the area between the navel and the knee, as these women mistakenly think.

With regard to mahrams, they may see as much as another woman may see, i.e., it is permissible for a woman to uncover in front of a mahram what she uncovers in front of other women, so she may uncover her head, neck, feet, hands, forearms, calves, etc, but she should not wear short clothes.