

## **Does Islam prohibit a woman from travelling without a close relative?**

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We will look at a hadith in Sahih Bukhari, in which the Holy Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said:

“A woman should not travel except with a *mahram*.” (Bukhari, hadith 1862)

By a *mahram* of a woman is meant someone from her very close male blood relatives, so close that she cannot marry them, such as her father, her brothers, and her sons. When this term is used anywhere, it often includes a woman’s husband, as in this hadith (even though he is not *mahram* in the sense of being one of the closest relatives whom she cannot marry). Sometimes the husband is mentioned distinctly.

Just two hadith later, in h. 1864, four things are mentioned. Two of them are relevant to our topic, and these are:

“No woman should travel without her husband or without a *mahram* for a two day journey.”

“A journey should not be undertaken except to three mosques: Masjid al-Haram (in Makkah), my Masjid (at Madinah) and Masjid al-aqsa (in Jerusalem).”

This second instruction applies to all Muslims, men as well as women.

(Note: These reports are also found in other Hadith books such as Sahih Muslim.)

In another place in Bukhari, there is a group of three hadith, from 1086 to 1088. We read there:

“A woman should not travel for more than three days except with a *mahram*.”  
(h. 1086, h. 1087)

“It is not permissible for a woman who believes in Allah and the Last Day to travel for one day and night except with a *mahram*.” (h. 1088)

Now notice that there are four different versions of this instruction about a woman travelling without a *mahram* accompanying her:

- She cannot travel at all,
- She can travel for up to one day and night,
- She can travel for two days,
- She can travel for three days.

This suggests the following questions: Could it be that the Holy Prophet was giving different advice to different people according to their circumstances and so he set different time limits? Or could it be that he gradually increased the length of time because travel was becoming safer?

Let us consider what a woman can still do, even if these travelling limits are applied literally and rigidly. The limits of one, two or three days don't affect a woman who travels by herself to work every day and comes home. Then there is the fact that these days any place in the world can be reached in much less than three days from anywhere else in the world! So a woman can travel from her home to any place in the world without a *mahram* accompanying her. At least she can travel from her home without a *mahram* to visit and stay with her close blood relatives anywhere in the world.

But think now of the days of the Holy Prophet, and travelling for more than one day in those times. You needed supplies with you, and money, and you needed to know how to find the way, where to stop for rest, where to spend the night, etc. Would it be possible for a woman to do that alone? In those days, the most trustworthy companions who could help her with the difficulties of the journey would be a *mahram*. Even today, in the most advanced countries of the world, women are warned to avoid travelling alone through certain places at certain times.

The Holy Prophet said in another hadith in Bukhari:

“Journey is a kind of torment. It deprives you of eating, drinking and sleeping. When a person on a journey completes his work, he should make haste in returning to his home.” (h. 1804)

Maulana Muhammad Ali, in his Urdu translation of Bukhari, writes the following note under h. 1862, which was the first hadith quoted at the outset of this article:

“In h. 1860, just above, it has been reported that Umar allowed the wives of the Holy Prophet to travel for *Hajj* accompanied by men who were not *mahram* to them. No one objected to this action by Umar nor did the wives of the Holy Prophet refuse to go with them. This shows that a woman can travel even a long distance without a *mahram*. All that it amounts to is that if there is safety for a woman she can travel on her own. Again, it depends on the nature of the journey. Different hadith reports mention different lengths of journeys which a woman should not undertake without a *mahram*: it is one day in h. 1088, two days in h. 1864, and three days in h. 1086. A journey shorter than this can be undertaken without a *mahram*. It is also agreed that a woman can travel with other women. All this shows that, if there is safety in a journey for a woman, she can travel without a *mahram*. Otherwise a *mahram* is required.”

So that is the explanation given by Maulana Muhammad Ali.

Now let us turn to the following hadith also mentioned in the beginning:

“A journey should not be undertaken except to three mosques: Masjid al-Haram, my Masjid and Masjid al-aqsa.”

This hadith applies to both men and women. It occurs alongside the one which says: “No woman should travel without her husband or without a *mahram* for a two day journey”.

It is impossible to take this literally. How can a Muslim, man or woman, not undertake any journey whatsoever except to these mosques in Makkah, Madinah and Jerusalem? So Muslim scholars had to interpret it in some other way.

One interpretation is that the “journey” it is talking about is when you undertake a special journey to visit a sacred place, believing that you are going to a holy place, sanctified by Allah, to obtain spiritual blessings. This hadith is a warning to Muslims not to treat other mosques and shrines and tombs as if they were places of pilgrimage on a par with these three mosques.

You may ask, what about when we, members of this organization, undertake a special journey to attend our annual gathering in Lahore for spiritual inspiration?

In that case, the people who go there don't consider our Centre as a place which is in itself sacred. At one time people went to Ahmadiyya Buildings in the inner area of Lahore for this annual gathering, but since the past 45 years they go to Darus Salaam in a suburb of Lahore. So it is not the physical location which they consider sacred, but it is the gathering which, because of its aims and objectives and collective worship, inspires them spiritually and refreshes their faith and commitment to the cause of Islam.

In explanation of this hadith there is an article, in the form of a fatwa, at the website [www.islamqa.info](http://www.islamqa.info). It says that it is not allowed for Muslims "to visit places that are regarded as holy in other religions". It also says that it is not permissible for a Muslim to visit a non-Muslim country except for reasons such as "travelling for medical treatment that is not available in a Muslim country, or travelling to study something that is not available in a Muslim country, or travelling for business purposes".

This article also says: "As for travelling for tourism (meaning to non-Muslim countries), that is not permissible, because the Muslim has no need of that."

As you can see, the restrictions mentioned in this article are impractical, ridiculous and damaging. This is why you don't see Muslims obeying them.

When Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad instituted the annual gathering of his followers at Qadian at the start of the 1890s, a maulvi published a fatwa to say that going to such a gathering was prohibited in Islam because a Muslim is not allowed to travel anywhere except to the three mosques as mentioned in Hadith. Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad wrote in his reply:

"Every Muslim ought to pray that God rid Islam soon of those maulvis who show such treachery (to the cause of Islam). For, this is a critical time for Islam, and these foolish friends wish to make Islam a target of ridicule and mockery

by making statements which every person, with his light of reason, finds to be untrue.”

The entire reply given by him is well worth reading.

So just as we cannot take *literally* this hadith that a Muslim cannot undertake a journey except to these three mosques, we also cannot take *literally* these hadith about a woman not being allowed to go on a journey without a *mahram* if the journey is longer than a certain number of days.

Turning to the Quran, such restrictions are not found anywhere in it. What we find in the Quran are the following examples:

- Abraham under Divine command left his wife and infant in the wilderness which is now Makkah. A Companion of the Holy Prophet says in a hadith in Bukhari: “During those days there was nobody in Makkah, nor was there any water” (h. 3364). This comment shows that her being in Makkah was just like she was on a journey. It happened sometime later that the people of a certain tribe passed by. After asking permission from Abraham’s wife, they settled there. Who was the *mahram* present with his wife, either before or after these people settled there? She had no *mahram* there. And all this happened under the command of God.
- The story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is given in the Quran. It says that when she became pregnant with Jesus, she went to “a remote place” (19:22). The famous Muslim scholar Maulana Maudoodi writes under this verse as follows: “She left all her relatives and went alone to a distant place to give birth”. So Maulana Maudoodi confirms that no *mahram* went with her. Mary received revelation from Allah during this journey (19:24–26) but Allah did not advise her against going on this journey alone, without a *mahram*.

Going back to Bukhari, we find that it contains a prophecy made by the Holy Prophet Muhammad which helps greatly in resolving this issue. Someone by the name of Adi ibn Hatim says that a man came to the Holy Prophet and complained about highway robberies taking place, making travelling unsafe. The Holy Prophet said to Adi:

“Have you been to Al-Hira?”

Al-Hira was a city in Iraq, and was under the Persian empire during the life of the Holy Prophet, but was conquered by Muslims shortly after his death. Adi replied that he had not seen this city but only heard of it. The Holy Prophet said:

“If you should live for a long time, you will certainly see that a woman in a *howdah* travelling from Al-Hira will perform the *Tawaf* of the Ka’bah (i.e., making circuits around it), fearing none but Allah.”

A *howdah* is a carriage, like a little enclosure or booth, which is placed on a camel’s back to carry people.

Adi says that when he heard this from the Holy Prophet, the thought came to his mind:

“What will happen to the robbers of the tribe of Tai who have spread evil throughout the country?”

Then Adi goes on to say that he saw this prophecy fulfilled many years later. He says:

“I saw a woman in a *howdah* travelling from Al-Hira till she performed the *Tawaf* of the Ka’bah, fearing none but Allah.” (h. 3595)

These words “fearing none but Allah” mean that there was no danger from anyone that she faced in her journey alone, as the country had become that safe. The distance from Al-Hira to Makkah is about 1000 miles. So her journey was more than one month in duration.

In the end this important point of principle should be emphasized. In understanding statements made in Hadith, we cannot make a general rule based on looking at just one hadith. We have to consider other hadith as well that are relevant, and then see what conclusion all of these collectively lead us to. Most importantly, we must check to see whether the Quran supports or contradicts the conclusion we are drawing from a hadith.

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