

Reimagining the Role of Institutions in Building Gender-Equal Societies



A statement of the Bahá'í International Community
to the 68th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

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In the Katuyola village of Zambia, the governing institution of a local faith community, elected by its members, organized a two-day gathering of some 120 local women of various faith backgrounds to explore questions related to the role of women in society. Male members of the institution handled logistical arrangements such as cooking and serving food, so that female members could more fully participate in the gathering—a level of support described by many as a remarkable shift within the historical context of their society.

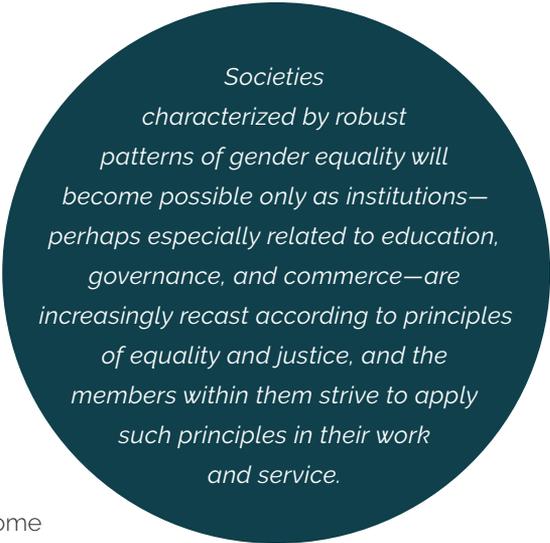
What does it look like for institutions to be characterized by qualities such as flexibility, responsiveness, and collaboration, rather than traits traditionally associated with norms of patriarchy, such as behavior that is authoritarian or competitive?

Part of an ongoing process of consultation and collaboration among traditional leaders, faith actors, parents, youth, and children, this gathering resulted in literacy classes for women in the village, assistance with backyard gardens and a local savings bank to help them generate income, and the establishment of a local center

of learning. Just as importantly, the gathering explored what adjustments to the functioning of the village, including its institutional structures and norms, would be required to more fully embody the principle of gender equality, and remove barriers to women's full engagement in community life.

What does it look like for institutions to prioritize gender equality and its many requirements, instead of women being relegated to the sidelines? What does it look like for gender equality to advance concurrently across a variety of institutions, as opposed to progress in one arena being hampered by continued obstacles in others? What does it look like for institutions to be characterized by qualities such as flexibility, responsiveness, and collaboration, rather than traits traditionally associated with norms of patriarchy, such as behavior that is authoritarian or competitive?

Experiences like those in Katuyola begin to address such questions and give a glimpse of the influence that institutions have on the roles, circumstances, and opportunities open to women and girls. Societies characterized by robust patterns of gender equality will become possible only as institutions—perhaps especially related to education, governance, and commerce—are increasingly recast according to principles of equality and justice, and the members within them strive to apply such principles in their work and service.



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Sadly, without the necessary institutional vision, ethical commitment, and operational capabilities, various forms of corruption or simply a lack of effective functioning have led to the erosion of public trust in institutions and, in many places, a growing crisis of authority and governance. The Bahá'í International Community therefore welcomes, as both relevant and timely, the focus of this year's Commission on the Status of Women, on strengthening institutions as a means of advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.



It is an unfortunate reality that many institutions and their members today are committed to the status quo, with some actively working to maintain biased or inequitable patterns of gender relations. Yet many others, from those formally affiliated with the women's movement to those undertaking broad efforts that nevertheless benefit women and girls, are daily advancing the cause of gender equality. Assisting all such institutions to become more effective in the good work they do—for example, by organizing regular spaces where different organizations can share and draw from one another's experiences in a common process of learning—is a key means of ensuring that policies and decisions become increasingly gender responsive. Agencies and organizations

related to the women's movement would therefore do well to give attention to the functioning of relevant institutions, just as institutions of all kinds need to be giving attention to the advancement of women.

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to evolving social realities. The need for institutional flexibility—in structure, operational norms, organizational refinement, and similar elements—is clear enough to those familiar with international processes. Yet such flexibility is often resisted in practice, whether through fear of change or simply the inertia of the status quo. Such tendencies will need to be overcome if institutions are to effectively pursue their aims. In particular, a deep sense of shared endeavor around the common cause of gender equality must transcend loyalty to any one department, program, agency, or funding source.

As institutions strive to refine their functioning, they can assist the implementation of global agendas or national policies to be more responsive to the context-specific realities facing women and girls in different localities. Helpful in this regard is the notion of a shared conceptual framework, that defines both broad principles that will guide grassroots action, as well as the methodological approaches that underlie it. Organizing endeavors around such a framework ensures a baseline of common elements that allows diverse actors to speak productively to one another and contribute to a collective body of experience and knowledge—learning from one another’s approaches but not blindly imitating them.

Institutions can also serve a vital function in facilitating flows of information and knowledge, including from one level of activity or analysis to another. In the pursuit of constructive social change, particularly in areas of belief, attitude, and values such as gender equality, the richest experience tends to emerge from the grassroots. Often it is at the street corner, village square, or kitchen table where the



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deepest insights emerge, into how biased norms and the many habits of patriarchy can start to loosen and make way for new relationships between women and men. Yet such processes are limited if they are not connected to channels of inquiry and experience at wider levels. An important need, therefore, is strengthening institutional mechanisms by which grassroots experiences related to the advancement of women can be collected from local communities, aggregated at the national or global level, and analyzed to identify constructive patterns and effective approaches. Resulting insights can then be disseminated back to the grassroots through those same channels, informing future planning and action.



Institutions function in collaboration with local communities and numerous individuals in advancing the common good. In a wide variety of cultural contexts, the principles and elements described above have proven vital to all three of those key protagonists upholding more faithfully and applying more consistently the principle of gender equality. Institutions have become more effective agents of true social transformation as they have both refined the processes of their internal functioning and aligned those processes with essential moral and ethical convictions: that women and men have always been equal in capacity and potential, for example; that the welfare of any

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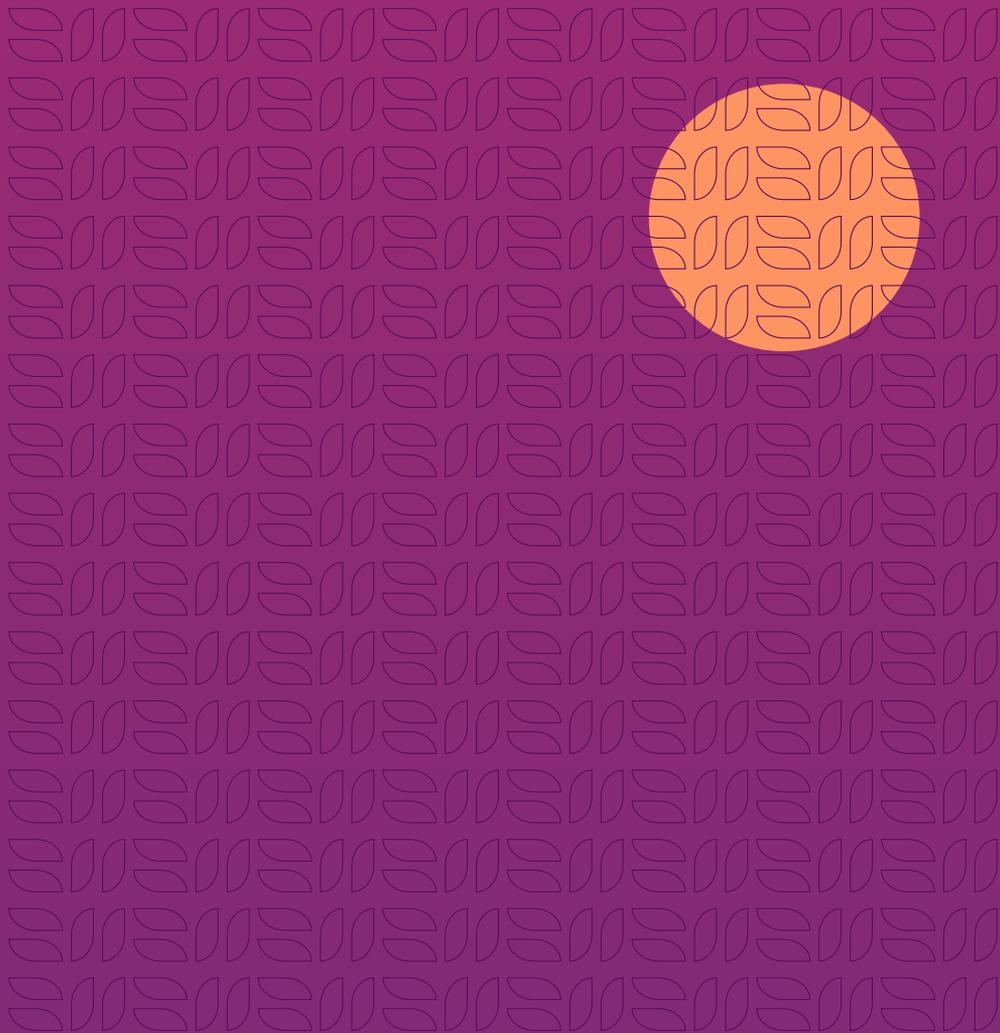
segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole; that rational investigation of the truth must prevail over adherence to rigid ideologies and baseless prejudices.

Though only humble steps on a much longer path, examples like the ongoing gatherings of women in Katuyola reveal possibilities for new approaches to the institutions

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of society and new patterns of relationship between them and the individuals and communities they serve. In such experiences can be seen examples of how the principle of gender equality emerges in a population as a valued end in its own right, as well as a means to more effectively

achieve all other objectives. In this way, a coherent and broad-based movement toward the construction of more gender-equal societies can begin to take shape in more and more areas.



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