

*Leadership for a  
Culture of Equality,  
in Times of Peril  
& Peace*

*A statement of the Bahá'í International Community  
to the 65<sup>th</sup> session of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women*

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# *Leadership for a Culture of Equality, in Times of Peril & Peace*

**A** **AGAINST THE BACKDROP** of a world undergoing profound change, there is a growing recognition of the indispensable role that women in leadership play. In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, nations in which women contributed more prominently to the leadership of society were seen to have generated a degree of stability across a variety of short-term indicators, including public health and economic security. At the community level, women continue to play an indispensable role—and often lead—in caring for the sick, educating the young, tending to the needy, and sustaining the social and economic fabric more broadly. Never has it been more clear how much humanity benefits when women's leadership is embraced and promoted at every level of society, whether in the family or the village, the community or local government, the corporation or the nation. Bringing the full extent of this capacity to bear on contemporary challenges will require movement on at least two fronts: increasing women's presence in roles of leadership and the affairs of society, and applying more widely and consistently the

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qualities that women tend to bring to processes of problem-solving and decision-making.

Any consideration of women's participation in public life must include a reevaluation of models of leadership. Moments of acute peril in the life of humanity require leaders with well-trained minds, who are able to harness the power of science as well as moral and ethical principles, and who consult a diverse cross-section of experienced individuals in relevant areas. These leaders would harmonize different voices and foster a sense of common endeavor. Resisting the allurements of power, they would be characterized by integrity, trustworthiness, and unwavering adherence to principled action.

Of course, these attributes can be manifested by leaders irrespective of sex, and gender-equal and feminist policies can yield beneficial results regardless of who promotes them. Yet, it is becoming clear that increased participation of women in the life of society strengthens these qualities as an aspect of the culture of leadership—and not just as personal characteristics of individual leaders. Qualities of leadership often associated with masculinity—assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness, for example—have proven limited or counterproductive when not tempered with other attributes traditionally associated with femininity, such as compassion, humility, and a tendency toward collaboration and inclusion. The most effective leaders foster environments where individuals and communities are able to transcend differences of mindset, find the points of consensus in even the most perplexing and challenging situations, and build upon these patiently and deliberately, upholding at all times the standard of justice.

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Women's particular perspectives and experiences—including the common inclination to prioritize the well-being of children and families, or to

consider the human impact of policies more broadly—equip them to make decisive contributions to the construction of such an ethic of leadership.

Advances in more visible aspects of leadership, such as women holding top positions in government, academia, or business, as well as other spaces where decisions are taken, such as within the family or commu-

nity, must be accompanied by commensurate develop-

ments at the level of culture. Lasting transforma-

tion will require a whole-of-society dedication

to gender equality and a commitment to

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and men in a dynamic and equal partner-

ship, at every level of society and in every

facet of life. For this reason, the work of

advancing gender equality must proceed

in the local context as much as the inter-

national. Organizing decision-making pro-

cesses around the search for collective under-

standing, soliciting a diversity of perspectives in

search of new insights into complex issues, taking

measures that assist a wide variety of stakeholders to take

a more active role in public life—fostering approaches and values such as these in neighborhoods and villages contributes to the environment by which formal and institutional barriers, such as discriminatory laws and uneven access to education, can be dismantled.

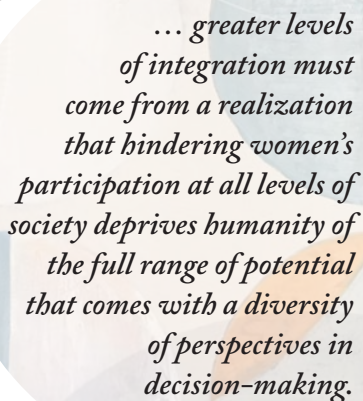
Just as importantly, the process of building more gender-equitable patterns of community life itself provides opportunities for women to develop leadership abilities and experience, participate in decision-making bodies, and take a far more active and visible role in public life. Working to reconceptualize systems and structures in light of needed qualities associated with the feminine, particularly at the local level, will afford women and men alike opportunities to learn how to overcome barriers to women's participation, like intimidation in majority male spaces or norms that frame women's contributions in the context of the home—barriers

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ultimately to good governance and enduring peace. The impact on men and boys can be just as significant. Providing opportunities, from even the earliest years, for boys to see girls as equals and women as leaders will conduce to a culture of collaboration, and scaffold learning required for sustained and growing expressions of equality. And beyond conscious effort to overcome such obstacles, greater levels of integration must come from a realization that hindering women's participation at all levels of society deprives humanity of the full range of potential that comes with a diversity of perspectives in decision-making.

Establishing just relationships at all levels of society can take a variety of forms, involving numerous actors, and the full participation of women in all these spaces will, no doubt, prove indispensable in building equitable patterns of life.

For its part, the worldwide Baha'i community is exploring the role that applying spiritual principles to the life of society can play in breaking down prejudices of sex and gender. Central in this regard is the concept of capacity-building—of enhancing the ability of women and men, girls and boys alike, to champion and apply the principle of gender equality in all manner of circumstances and situations, for the betterment of all. Through educational programs that aim to break down prejudicial barriers by instilling attitudes of unity and fellowship, children are nurtured from an early age to walk shoulder to shoulder with diverse actors in service to their societies. Simple gatherings for neighbors to pray and discuss the implications of religious ideals, often held in participants' homes, have also become a locus for the loosening of age-old gender restrictions. The head of a primary school in one village in India, for example, noted that devotional gatherings, as these meetings are often called, are one of the few activities in which the possibility of women leaving their houses has



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found acceptance in the community and a long-standing system requiring women to seclude and isolate themselves is starting to give way. “This [cultural] system is not more important than the education of children. Or letting women step out of the house. Or having consultations with each other,” she observes. “How we are able to consult with each other, reach out to other people, and solve our problems together has now become an important aspect of our lives.”

Throughout history, when spaces traditionally confined to men have been opened to women, it has often been in the context of warfare, revolution, and breakdown. It is true that in times of crisis, from local hardships to national disasters, women have demonstrated their capacity and resilience time and again. Yet all too often the powers of society have relegated women back to the confines of the household when semblances of peace and calm return. This is a pattern that must be overcome. No rational justification, on any grounds, can be found for forfeiting the manifold benefits women bring to the task of ordering the affairs of society. Therefore, a question of central importance facing this Commission and the international system as a whole is how women’s capacities can be embraced and integrated in times of peace as well as turmoil, in daily routine as well as exception.

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Perhaps never before have the ties linking the peoples of the world been more clear. Recognition of this interconnection must be matched by determination to draw on humanity’s capacity in its entirety and across the abundance of its diversity. No serious consideration of humanity’s next steps of development can ignore the need to expand women’s full and effective participation in decision-making and public life. Only to the degree that these capabilities are given full expression will communities and societies have the range of tools needed to address the many challenges facing humanity. ❁



# Bahá'í International Community

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