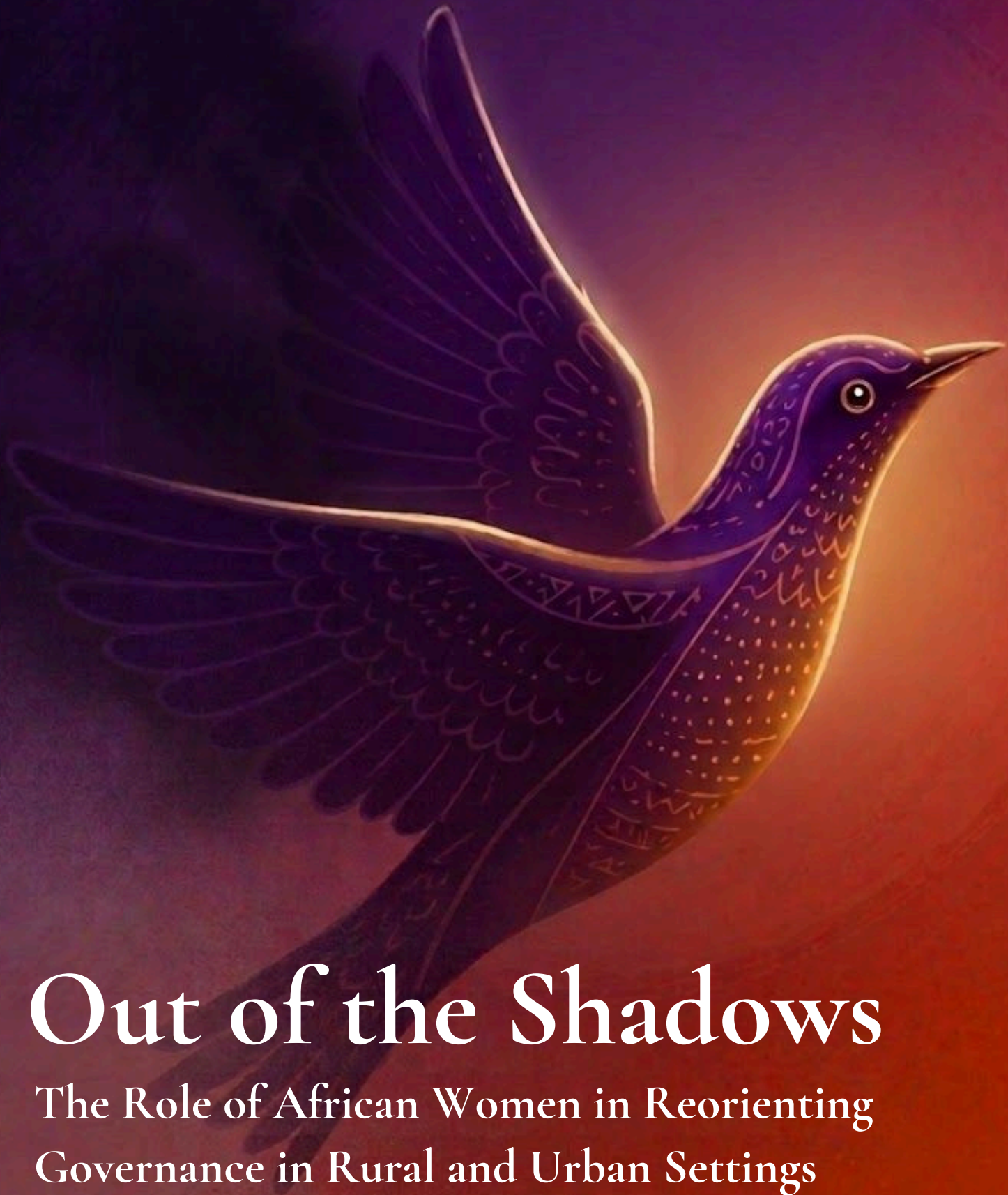


BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY • ADDIS ABABA OFFICE



Out of the Shadows

The Role of African Women in Reorienting
Governance in Rural and Urban Settings

STATEMENT OF THE
BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY • ADDIS ABABA OFFICE

The 64th anniversary of the historic All-African Women's Conference invites us to reflect on what the full realization of equality between women and men in Africa calls for. Beyond expanded representation and legal protections, true equality entails a reorientation of governance itself. It requires a steady transformation of the assumptions, relationships, and processes through which African societies have organized collective life, so that women are fully recognized and included as indispensable agents in shaping the continent's future.

Across the continent, social life has long depended on patterns of interdependence and cooperation among individuals, families, communities, and institutions. Yet, this did not translate into a just reality for women who, beneath the weight of complex historical forces and harmful practices, have largely been sidelined from serving as central architects in the continent's development. Even so, history reveals that at each stage of the collective journey, more complex levels of integration and cooperation become not only possible, but necessary.

Redefining progress

African women are active protagonists who have always played a decisive role in the survival, resilience and progress of their communities, even when their rights were slow to be recognized. Across generations, these women offer profound insights through their experiences, demonstrating how ingenuity, tenacity, and courage can sustain a community.

Regrettably, because the labor of women across Africa is in many instances confined to unpaid and subsistence sectors, mainstream economic metrics can overlook it—casting the contribution of these women into the shadows. This exclusion points to inherent limitations in prevailing conceptions of progress that measure advancement primarily through material indicators while overlooking the relationships, capacities, and forms of cooperation that sustain collective life. This oversight reflects deeper assumptions about whose knowledge, experiences, and voices matter. Laying the foundation of an equal society thus calls for a redefined vision of progress, one which values intangible contributions, preserves dignity and unity, and unlocks the collective expression of human potential.

Contemporary thought usually frames equality between the sexes in terms of legislative mandates and institutional quotas. While these pillars are indispensable, rights and representation alone do not automatically transform the assumptions that continue to constrain women.

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On their own, legal and political metrics are insufficient to sustain the profound transformation of institutions, relationships, and patterns of participation upon which enduring equality depends. The experience of the Bahá'í community demonstrates that for women to assume their rightful roles alongside men, the principle of equality needs to be intentionally woven into the fabric of community life by creating the conditions necessary for social and institutional transformation from the grassroots to the highest levels of governance. This effort is underpinned by the conviction that the collective advancement of society rests upon the balanced equilibrium of its two essential pillars: women and men. While equality between the sexes is often treated as a privilege reserved for select groups, it is in truth a universal bedrock for progress. True governance cannot endure on a foundation that compromises the full participation of women.

Toward cooperative governance

The understanding that humanity is an interconnected organism, where the well-being of the individual is inseparable from the collective, deeply resonates across the African continent, finding expression in philosophies such as *ubuntu*. While this ideal is celebrated in spirit, it has yet to be fully actualized in practice.

"Just as a bird is grounded by the weakness of a single wing, a social order that excludes or diminishes women creates an imbalance that undermines the progress and cohesion of the whole."

At the root of the countless barriers preventing women and girls from assuming their rightful place in society is a refusal to embrace the equality of women and men, a stance that directly undermines the unity of the collective. This refusal distorts how human nature is understood, and it must be overcome if relationships are to reflect the inherent dignity of all human beings. Only then can the capacity of every individual, both woman and man, be fully released to contribute to a more cooperative and unified Africa. As the need for peace and justice grows increasingly urgent, this profound re-examination of the core assumptions governing human relations cannot occur without the full, equal voice of women.

Among these assumptions is the limiting conception regarding the capacity of women to participate in and lead decision-making processes. Consider rural settings where long-established patterns of authority continue to determine who holds formal standing and whose contributions are publicly recognized.

A significant gap becomes apparent: even in regions where women play central roles in sustaining community life and influencing local dynamics, their perspectives are rarely reflected in the formal processes through which decisions are publicly articulated and enacted. Such exclusion leaves untapped one of society's most essential resources. Governance, after all, encompasses the processes through which communities organize collective life, generate solutions, and pursue shared well-being. Women's participation is therefore essential alongside that of men—not only as a matter of justice but as a matter of capacity—because it expands the range of insight a society can bring to its most complex challenges.

Learning about enduring transformation

The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Maputo Protocol reflect a clear consensus on the participation of women in shaping the future of the continent. The former frames women's leadership as essential for progress, while the latter provides the legal backing to secure participation as a human right.

Yet, the real task ahead lies in reorienting the structures, processes, and social dynamics through which society organizes itself, so that the capacities of all its members can contribute to collective prosperity. The work of advancing equality cannot remain confined to continental frameworks or national arenas; it must take root in the villages, neighborhoods, and townships where governance takes practical shape.

Examples are emerging where more mature expressions of community life and institutional arrangements have enabled women to lead as protagonists in the face of hardship and even disaster. These examples offer a glimpse of how new, resilient patterns of social organization can gradually take shape across the continent. Among these are efforts undertaken by Bahá'í communities and their collaborators, drawn from every cross-section of society. From the villages of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, and Zambia, to urban centres of Malawi and Nigeria, and the townships of South Africa, a notable dynamic is unfolding.

Women and youth are emerging as two groups whose shared commitment to advancing collective well-being is very effectively nurtured by an educational process that motivates them to lead the transformation of local governance and community life. This momentum is reinforced by a global system of knowledge-flow through which relevant lessons learned in one locality are systematically shared across the continent and beyond, allowing communities and institutions to draw strength from a unified, collective body of experience. Driving this process is the conviction that every individual possesses the inherent capacity to contribute to the well-being of society. Far from promoting a self-centered approach to development, this framework aligns individual effort with collective progress, cultivates purity of motive, and creates conditions where diverse social groups honor their common humanity, recognize mutual interests, and envision a shared future.

Stimulated by this transformative educational framework, communities are carving out distinct collaborative arrangements—including village educational teams and networks of youth, mothers, farmers, teachers, and families to systematically tackle their social challenges, drawing on a shared set of principles geared toward the common good. In doing so, they are reshaping how inclusive governance functions on the ground.

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Whatever their composition, these spaces foster relationships of mutual interdependence that bridge the divides between women and men, youth and elders, and local populations and institutional bodies. In rural areas especially, traditional leaders increasingly turn to these women to navigate crises and chart a path toward social harmony. Recognizing their acute understanding of local realities and steadfast commitment, these leaders have begun to elevate the participation of women in the consultative and decision-making arenas that shape the community's trajectory. Similarly, in urban centres, groups of mothers convene regularly to explore how to protect young people from pervasive materialistic forces. Their dedication has earned the trust of municipal councils, which now actively solicit their insights on strategies for youth support.

Such transformation, however, can operate only within a culture that is united in spirit and method. One defining characteristic of this culture is the conviction that the governance of human affairs can be conducted along lines that serve the true needs of all sectors of society, however long the process and whatever setbacks may be encountered. These changing dynamics ultimately redefine how power is conceived, shifting the paradigm away from an outdated focus on dominance and control toward an expression rooted in cooperation, trust, and mutual encouragement. Of course, this reorientation of relationships and systems does not emerge spontaneously—it is nurtured by a process that is fundamentally educational in nature. Here, the Bahá'í community and its collaborators are witnessing how a distinct pedagogical approach can unlock collective capacity to generate new knowledge, advance thought, and transform human interactions long after periods of study conclude.

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In this way, capacity is strengthened among women and men, children, youth, and older adults to participate in the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge. These examples are not offered as a definitive blueprint, but rather to illustrate how inclusive forms of governance can evolve through processes of collective learning.



African women have always actively guided and shaped social reality; the opportunity now is for systems of governance across the continent to evolve to reflect this truth, drawing on the full spectrum of human talent and experience to cultivate a more just, unified, and prosperous social order. For this reason, efforts to advance equality cannot stop at opening doors to positions of influence for a select few. They call for a profound reimagining of governance itself—one that cultivates the conditions in which the distinct contributions of every individual are recognized, valued, and applied to the common good, ensuring that the women whose counsel a community already seeks are consistently included, with a full and equal voice, in the institutional structures that shape its future.

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