

IN FULL PARTNERSHIP

Thirty Years of
Women's Advancement
at the United Nations
and Beyond

*A Collection of Statements by
the Bahá'í International Community
on the Subject of Gender Equality*



IN FULL PARTNERSHIP: THIRTY YEARS OF WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT AT THE UNITED NATIONS AND BEYOND

A COLLECTION OF STATEMENTS BY
THE BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY
ON THE SUBJECT OF GENDER EQUALITY

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FOREWORD

The Bahá'í community's commitment to gender equality and justice is rooted in its conviction that all human beings “have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.”¹ Each person is likened in the Bahá'í writings to “a mine rich in gems of inestimable value”—treasures that require intentional and concerted effort to be revealed and directed toward the benefit of all. Gender equality is not only a goal which humanity aspires to achieve, but a necessary condition for peace and prosperity. Failure to recognize that women and men are equal ultimately impedes the material, social, and spiritual flourishing of every individual.


The equality of women and men is a core tenet of the Bahá'í Faith, and one which guides Bahá'ís in all facets of human life. In over 100,000 Bahá'í communities around the world, new social norms and institutional structures are emerging. These norms and structures are characterized by women and men striving shoulder to shoulder to foster relationships rooted in the dignity of every human being and a sense of shared endeavor. In the international arena, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) has participated in consultations about gender equality since the establishment of the United Nations (UN), including all four UN World Conferences on Women² and the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Over the years, the BIC has substantively contributed to CSW processes, actively advanced the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign, and supported the work of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women. Alongside diverse partners, the BIC remains committed to being at the forefront of discussions to strengthen CSW as well as other efforts to advance the status of women across the UN system.

Three decades after the historic adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—an unprecedented global agenda for women's and girls' rights—the current moment invites the international community to reckon with enduring challenges and to recommit to a shared narrative of the world we are building together. On one hand, the pursuit of gender equality is being met with aggressive backlash. Political polarization, rising authoritarianism, entrenched patriarchal attitudes, and the reassertion of harmful norms, under the guise of cultural or ideological preservation, pose formidable obstacles to progress. On the other hand, the combined efforts of individuals, social movements, and organizations have led to significant advancements on many fronts.

In this connection, for the first time, the BIC has gathered a selection of its statements—organized according to the 12 critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, in addition to two thematic areas on the role of men and boys and intersections between faith and feminism—on themes related to gender equality over the past 30 years. The selections draw on the experience of thousands of communities in virtually every country and territory around the world, in which Bahá'ís, working alongside friends, co-workers, government officials, and like-minded organizations, are learning to give concrete expression to the principle of gender equality. In this growing body of experience, one can discern new attitudes, new patterns of thought and mutual support, and new institutional arrangements dedicated to the education, participation, and flourishing of women and girls alongside men and boys. Across a vast

1 Bahá'í holy writings

2 BIC representatives were present at all four UN World Conferences on Women: Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995.



diversity of cultural and economic realities, one can see obstacles that have prevented women and girls from fully participating in the life of society beginning to give way to new patterns of community life characterized by justice, cohesion, and mutual support. The BIC invites the arbiters of international affairs to give earnest consideration to the approaches and outcomes detailed in this collection, which give a glimpse into the deep-rooted transformation that is possible when gender equality becomes a lived principle shaping the fabric of daily life.


The promise of interdependence, the mutuality of flourishing

The deep interdependence of humanity, now widely and emphatically affirmed by growing numbers around the world, has particular implications for the pursuit of gender equality. The human body provides a helpful analogy. Here, millions of cells, diverse in form and function, are governed by the principle of cooperation. Each cell, from inception, is linked to countless others through a continuous process of giving and receiving. Considered in this light, the quest for gender equality is not merely a social good to be achieved for half of humanity, just as it is not possible for one part of the human body to thrive apart from the whole. Rather, it is a central component of a flourishing society and a key prerequisite for lasting peace. Unequivocally, neglecting the needs and aspirations of women and girls—whether through the denial of resources, the dysfunction of institutional support, or the rejection of the dignity, rights, and experience of women—has caused immense suffering for millions of women and men alike. It is now more widely acknowledged that the lack of women’s participation has stalled peace processes and hindered economic, intellectual, social, and moral advancement. In the absence of their ability to fully and meaningfully influence or contribute to family, community, and public life, we have failed not only women and girls but also narrowed the horizon of what men and boys might become in a just and inclusive society.

Learning our way toward gender equality

In working its way toward gender equality, humanity is building something that has never existed before. How does gender equality find expression in individual mindsets and attitudes, as well as in interpersonal relationships and family dynamics? What are its many implications in the community or the workplace? What does it look like in governing institutions? Building on the foundation of human rights norms and institutional frameworks, the international community continues to grapple with the deeper challenge of effecting the attitudinal and cultural shifts needed for lasting change. Indeed, history has demonstrated that institutional reforms remain tenuous and vulnerable to shifts in power and priorities if they are not accompanied by more enduring transformation within individual mindsets and social norms.

Across diverse cultural and economic contexts, the worldwide Bahá’í community has observed that gender equality is more effectively advanced through processes where the capacity for collective learning is intentionally fostered. In this context, “learning” is understood as a deliberate process, scientific in nature—undertaken by individuals, communities, and institutions—that centers on action, reflection on experience, and consultation. Such a process—characterized by rigorous and systematic pursuit—is further shaped by qualities of humility, an openness to new perspectives, and the ability to adjust approaches in response to evolving conditions. Drawing on experience from thousands of such communities, the BIC’s statements strive to highlight the implications of principles such as equality and justice, together with the possibility of translating them into practice. Whether in the form of new patterns of relationships emerging among individuals and within families, communities, and institutions, or efforts to establish alternative structural arrangements or approaches to social transformation, such examples are yielding hopeful and tangible insights about the expression of gender equality in diverse parts of the world.



Coherence between the means and ends of gender equality: Emphasis on process


Central to BIC statements is the conviction that the pursuit of justice and social change must be a unifying process—where goals and methods promote unity and justice. Too often, progress toward gender equality remains elusive or unsustainable because efforts in that direction are advanced through partisan means. In the absence of broad consensus about relevant principles, support around policy is often limited by political expediency, exacerbating division and risking reversal at the first turn of political tides. Efforts to advance gender equality, in particular, have often been hindered by ideological polarization—framed as liberal versus conservative, modern versus traditional, secular versus religious.

One approach that has helped communities steer away from the pitfalls associated with these challenges is the principle and practice of consultation—a process of collective deliberation central to Bahá’í life. More than a tool for decision making alone, consultation involves a shared and unifying search for truth grounded in justice, humility, and the recognition of the dignity, nobility, and worth of every human being. Consultative approaches have been highly conducive to the participation of women, including in localities where tradition may have limited the roles of women outside of the home. Consultation not only allows individuals and communities to remain sensitive to the multifaceted dimensions connected to social markers such as caste, gender, and age, it has also helped shift prevailing norms toward a deeper appreciation of the valuable contributions of women and girls. At the UN, the BIC has sought to offer this ethos of constructive and principled deliberation as a complement to the substantive contributions of its statements.

Building more gender equitable communities: A shared endeavor

It is widely accepted that the path toward gender equality is not one to be walked by women and girls alone. Enduring social change cannot be delivered by one group for the benefit of another, nor is it sufficient for one segment of humanity to seek justice in isolation. In this light, the capacity and commitment of every member of the human race to contribute to this effort is essential. Youth actors, for instance, have a critical role to play in extending the legacy of older generations, and offering new perspectives that are less attached to the status quo. Feminists and faith actors are equally essential to the cause of gender equality, whether through the work of dismantling patriarchal notions and beliefs or constructively shaping attitudes and culture.

Men and boys have a vital role to play. Yet progress on this front has often been perceived in oppositional terms—that somehow progress for one group comes at the expense of another; that the advancement of women diminishes the power or stature of men. While advancing gender equality may require men to relinquish short-term or perceived privileges, grassroots experiences are giving insight into how such advantages—made possible through rigid conceptions about the role and place of men and women in society—have not only hindered but also harmed men and boys. On one hand, they are prevented from expressing the whole range of their humanity—for instance, when men and boys are socialized to reject qualities typically associated with femininity such as compassion, care, or mutual support. On the other, societies that cling to narrow notions related to the role of men and women suffer because those very conceptions lead to distorted forms of progress and inhibit the advancements that would have been available in a more equitable society. Just as the well-being of one organ in the human body depends on the vitality of the whole, the long-term benefits flow to all. The flourishing of men is inseparable from the flourishing of women; neither can rise while the other is held low. Yet the engagement of men and boys is not merely an enlightened gesture of goodwill, but rather an expression of justice. Thirty years ago, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was



seen by many as a document by women and for women; today a deeper understanding is needed—by men and women alike—that a full partnership is vital to the achievement of gender equality.

Drawing on local, national, and regional efforts, BIC statements identify three key protagonists in the advancement of gender equality: individuals, communities, and institutions, each invested with complementary responsibilities and capacities. The BIC’s film, *Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality*,³ illustrates how a cooperative dynamic can unfold. It features the experiences of Bahá’í communities in Colombia, India, Malaysia, the United States, and Zambia. The film highlights educational programs that cultivate new attitudes and foster a spirit of collaboration and service to society, social action initiatives that uplift the status and capacities of women and girls through education and skills-training, and efforts that contribute to the evolution of thought, for instance, around new conceptions of power tied to mutual flourishing and shared purpose. The resulting shifts in mindsets have led, over time, to new cultural patterns, laying the groundwork for constructive transformation in family, work, and community life. Elected Bahá’í institutions, along with networks and agencies operating at every level—from local to international—help systematize these efforts and reinforce coherence by gathering insights and sharing what is being learned, all within a unifying moral and conceptual framework for action.

At the heart of the BIC’s contributions, and indeed the global discourse on gender equality and human rights more broadly, is the question of what it means to be human. What constitutes our happiness and prosperity, and what responsibilities do we have toward one another as members of the human race? As many will agree, those things which make us human—the search for meaning, for purpose, for connection; the capacity to love, to create, to persevere—have no gender. Every human being is a “mine rich in gems of inestimable value,” is worthy, and is to be protected and nurtured. The latent, as yet untapped potential of countless women and girls, alongside men and boys, holds the promise of an intellectual and spiritual revolution capable of transforming the relational dimension of every facet of human life.

A future where women can fully and meaningfully engage as equal protagonists in all fields of human endeavor—and where every individual, irrespective of sex, is able to thrive as a co-creator of society—is the destination toward which humanity must now advance. Three decades after the Fourth World Conference on Women was held and its seminal Declaration adopted, the global conversation about the means of achieving gender equality continues unabated, more urgent than ever, and deeply challenged by setbacks. At the same time, it is strengthened by new insights and possibilities for collaboration. To this end, the BIC reaffirms its unwavering commitment to working alongside Member States, UN agencies, civil society organizations, and communities dedicated to the work of achieving gender equality, and it invites all to join in this shared endeavor. Beyond merely a long-held aspiration, the principle of gender equality must now be embraced and given practical expression across the world.

“Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge.” — The Universal House of Justice, world governing body of the Bahá’í Faith

3 *Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality*, a 45-minute documentary about the Bahá’í contributions to the quest for gender equality around the world, was released in 2020 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.



WOMEN AND POVERTY

ERADICATING POVERTY AND ADVANCING COLLECTIVE PROSPERITY

Bahá'ís recognize that the full participation of women in the life of society is essential to eradicating poverty and advancing collective prosperity. When societies across the world are plagued by extremes of wealth and poverty—symptoms of a social order characterized by inequity, self-interest, and fixation on profit-maximization—women and girls, who often lack equal access to productive resources and markets, are disproportionately harmed.

Yet women are not simply victims or under-resourced members of their communities. In both rural and urban settings, Bahá'ís are working with local institutions to improve food security through agricultural research projects and are implementing programs that equip individuals with the skills needed to initiate income-generating activities. Combining scientific knowledge with ethical principles, these programs promote material progress, while transforming prejudicial mindsets that have historically discriminated against women.



“

Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.

— Bahá'í holy writings

The Empowerment of Rural Women and their Role in Poverty and Hunger Eradication, Development and Current Challenges

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 56th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—27 February 2012

The critical role of women in advancing agricultural and rural development, and in ensuring food security, has been widely acknowledged. Member States have committed to providing rural women with equal access to productive resources and to markets—recognizing their agency in rural and agricultural development. Despite progress made, rural women persist with low levels of income, sparse access to education and health services, limited job security as well as limited land and inheritance rights. Again and again, their needs as well as their contributions are relegated to the margins of policy development and budgetary considerations. In addition to the entrenched patterns of discrimination, unsustainable development practices, climate change, and violence against women intensify the burden placed on women and their families.

When viewed in the broader context, the situation of rural women is but one of the symptoms of a social order characterized by inequity, violence and insecurity. As such, the vision of women's empowerment must go beyond making room for women to participate in society within the present social order, as this will not suffice to end the marginalization of rural populations and the entrenched patterns of discrimination against women. The empowerment of women requires profound changes in the minds and hearts of people and in the very structures of society. It begins with the understanding that the equality of women and men is more than a desired condition to be achieved for the common good; it is a dimension of human reality. In those aspects that make human beings human, women and men are fundamentally equal. The goal at hand, then, is not only the empowerment of women for the advancement of agriculture and rural life; it is the full engagement of women with men in the construction of a new social order. Though marginalized by present-day economic and development frameworks, women are neither victims nor simply under-resourced members of society. In fact, they represent the greatest source of untapped potential in the global effort to eradicate poverty and advance collective prosperity.

How, then, can we conceive of empowerment in a way that will begin to transform the current economic order and the condition of its rural women? We offer three considerations which address access to knowledge, the nature of full participation, and the importance of exploring diverse economic arrangements.

First, access to knowledge is the right of every human being. Yet, the patterns of knowledge generation and diffusion in the current world order divide the world into producers and users of knowledge. This has deep implications for the quality and legitimacy of education, technology, decision making, and governance. For example, despite the fact



A Bahá'í study group gathers at the Bahá'í centre in Murun, fostering learning and community in northern Mongolia

that most agricultural work in developing countries is carried out by low-income women, the primary shapers and users of agricultural technologies have been men. A key challenge is how to strengthen women's capacities to identify technological needs, and to create and adapt technologies in light of social needs and resource constraints. Reforming the present flow of knowledge—from 'North' to 'South'; from urban to rural; from men to women—will free development from narrowly conceived conceptions of 'modernization.'

Second, access to knowledge promotes meaningful and informed participation in decision making at the family, community and higher levels of social administration. Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods



Women take part in agricultural training at the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in Indore, India

and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. It is imperative, then, that the educational process associated with such capacity building assist rural women and girls to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as the driving force of an ongoing effort to apply knowledge to improve their own material and spiritual condition and to contribute to the betterment of their communities.

Third, the increased flows of goods, services, capital and labor within existing structures and processes benefit only a very few at the expense of many. This has given rise to the impoverishment of rural communities, the exploitation of vulnerable populations—women and children in particular—and the devastation of the environment. Such economic pressures have also led to the disappearance of diversified, ecologically sustainable small-scale agriculture, mostly found in rural areas, greatly impacting women who carry out the bulk of the work.... To note these realities is not to present a naïve idea of local economies but rather to stress that diverse economic arrangements need to be given space to develop.

This document has highlighted just three challenges that need to be addressed in the effort to empower rural women. While many more challenges remain, the Bahá'í International Community hopes that exploration of these issues can further the discourse on the role of rural women in advancing their own development and that of their communities. Moreover, it is hoped that such exploration will help to link these issues to the broader aim of promoting rural women's full engagement—shoulder to shoulder with men—in the construction of a more just social order.

Toward Prosperity: The Role of Women and Men in Building a Flourishing World Civilization

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 61st Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—3 March 2017

The leaders of the world bear an unenviable burden. They must provide for the well-being of their citizenries, preferring these over themselves, rejecting outdated models that emphasize self and promote imbalances of power. They must ask, and crucially begin answering, the right questions. For instance: What are the elements of our economic system that make it deeply dysfunctional? Why are women largely excluded from meaningful decision making when their participation benefits everyone? How can we stem the tide of growing inequality threatening the stability of nations? How can we invest in the well-being of rising generations, giving them every opportunity to walk a path far more meaningful and far less treacherous than the one we have tread?

Women and men are equal, and always have been. This is a spiritual truth whose expression in the world has been suppressed throughout most of history, owing in part to imbalanced systems and structures that have long favored men's progress and participation over women's. While the equality of women and men is being increasingly acknowledged, this does not automatically eliminate the impediments that can obstruct its expression in every dimension of life. On this occasion, as Member States gather to consult about the economic empowerment of women in the changing world of work, we would like to offer some comments on the nature of prosperity itself, taking for granted that it is at once the goal of economic activity and the outcome of genuine progress.

Significant advances have been made in terms of educational access and the creation of environments for women to thrive alongside men; nevertheless, far more remains to be accomplished. Systemic and structural injustice continues to suppress women's potential, plunging humanity into crisis after crisis. Until these inequalities are thoroughly uprooted from the fabric of society, humanity will remain mired in the conflict, despair, confusion, and imbalance that have come to define much of modern life. While the path toward prosperity has many obstacles, it is also paved with hope.

The world civilization to which humanity aspires is one where the material and spiritual dimensions of life are in harmony, and the material aspects of civilization, such as commerce and governance, are suffused with spiritual principles, such as equity and justice. Naturally, the potency and vigour of a civilization is contingent upon the strength of its component parts. In this regard there is much to say about the qualities governing the relationships among the individuals, institutions, and other constituents that comprise society.



A Bahá'í study circle in Puerto Tejada, Colombia

The prevailing economic and geopolitical orders are characterized by conflict and aggression to such an extent that many have succumbed to the view that these qualities represent inescapable features of human nature. While humans are capable of violence, selfishness, cowardice, and competition, they have also repeatedly demonstrated their ability to be kind, to prefer others over themselves, to carry out acts of valour at immense personal cost, and to cooperate when competition is the norm. How much more would these noble tendencies prevail if governments allocated substantial resources to cultivating the higher nature of their citizens, focusing vigorous learning processes around how the latent spiritual and moral powers of their inhabitants can be developed and released? What is more, the dynamics that have come to define relationships of power must be reimagined in the light of a genuine understanding of the oneness of humanity in order for all people to have an opportunity to lead meaningful lives. Understandably, changes of this magnitude will be hard won, requiring vision and sacrifice, and the long-term commitment of the leaders and citizens of the world.

A flourishing world civilization will draw on the participation of all people, whose skills and talents should be harmonized with the needs of the greater good.

A flourishing world civilization will draw on the participation of all people, whose skills and talents should be harmonized with the needs of the greater good. This will increasingly become possible as all children are given access to a quality education that helps them develop their intellectual and moral capabilities. Moreover, as women are the first educators of rising generations, their educational opportunity should be given emphasis in all communities. The caring, conciliatory qualities that women can bring to the workforce, indeed, to every sphere of life, have long been undervalued, and humanity has subsequently suffered. Can we foresee the fruits that will grow when true partnerships between men and women emerge in all dimensions of life? Humanity can be likened to a bird with two wings, the male

and the female, that has struggled to take flight because the female wing has been suppressed for so long. Who can fully envision the great heights to which humanity will soar when both wings are coordinated and strong?

The period of youth is one of immense significance in the life of any human being. This time of life represents a period with special possibilities. It is a time of preparation and action, when the young can develop an orientation to service and a sense of social responsibility that they will carry with them their entire lives. Neither is likely without a special kind of education. Education can be the difference between a young man who respects his female counterparts and one who brutalizes them. Education around such attitudes unfolds at home, in schools, in communities, and the myriad social environments where life plays out.

The family is a crucial social environment within which formative education takes place. In this regard, there is much to be learned about organizing societies in a way that does not exclude women from meaningful participation in work should they decide to dedicate a focused period of their lives to the rearing of children. Conversely, it is important to recognize the significant role of fathers in their families' lives; their ability for substantial engagement in this arena deserves special consideration.

The discipline that governs our relationships with the world is largely formed within the family. The tendencies to be unjust or just, to act violently or with kindness, to be dishonest or trustworthy, are usually developed at home. These habits are then taken into every instance of social interaction, becoming either obstacles or stepping stones to progress, tearing apart or weaving together the very fabric of society. If brothers are allowed to dominate their sisters, for instance, a habit is formed that will be carried from the living room to the classroom, the workplace and finally, the international arena. Conversely, when daughters are included in decision-making processes, when sons are encouraged to care for the household, characters are being developed. Children learn that the intellectual powers of both boys and girls are vital, that the nurturing qualities for which women are known are equally praiseworthy when demonstrated by men.



Bahá'í Activity in Austria



Women and girls from multiple generations study together in a Bahá'í community activity held in Panama

With respect to more formal educational programs, the significance of this stage of life must be borne in mind. Young people are beginning to understand their role in society, in all dimensions of life, including the economic life of their communities. If the rising generations are not merely to labor within an ailing system, but are to gradually contribute to the creation of a flourishing one, key capabilities must be cultivated early.

“ ***A key principle that must be taught from an early age is the oneness of humanity. Within this, the equality of women and men should be emphasized.*** ”

First, their education must be comprehensive, addressing their burgeoning spiritual, physical, and intellectual powers. A key principle that must be taught from an early age is the oneness of humanity. Within this, the equality of women and men should be emphasized. Young people see the contradictions in the world. Words and concepts alone cannot erase the often harmful messaging assailing them from all quarters. The inclusion of practical components in which boys and girls work shoulder to shoulder to identify challenges in their social environments, and consult on plans to address these, can benefit the entire community. Likewise, if they are accompanied by more experienced, trusted members of their communities to carry out acts of service while given the leeway to identify needs and design progressively more complex plans over time, the rising generations are assisted to develop new, healthy patterns of thought and action. From a young age, youth will learn that true leadership is characterized by selfless service, is borne by boys and girls equally, and is achieved through consultation, cooperation, and commitment to long-term action.

It is the hope of the Bahá'í International Community that world leaders will give serious thought not only to how the current economic system can receive more meaningful contributions from women, but also to how the rising generations can be assisted in building a new one.

Strengthening Solidarity: Social Cohesion as a Driver of Development

Excerpt from a Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 63rd Session of the United Nations Commission for Social Development

New York—22 January 2025

The 1995 World Summit for Social Development reflected a powerful sense of optimism that the international community could come together to address the deepest needs and aspirations of the peoples of the world—to advance “human prosperity in the fullest sense of the term,” as described in a *statement* released by the Bahá'í International Community on that occasion.

The Summit's outcome document highlighted the critical importance of social integration, alongside poverty eradication and productive employment, in fostering social development. In doing so, it drew attention to a key reality of the contemporary world: that the roots of numerous global challenges lie in how human beings view, value, respond to, and relate to one another. The Bahá'í International Community therefore welcomes the priority theme of this year's Commission for Social Development, including its focus on “strengthening solidarity, social inclusion and social cohesion.”

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“... the roots of numerous global challenges lie in how human beings view, value, respond to, and relate to one another.”

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Vital as it is, social inclusion has long been recognized as one of the less clearly defined elements of the social development agenda. An essential need before the international community, then, is to deepen understanding of the process by which the relationships underlying the social fabric can be strengthened—and how such strengthening can assist a community to measurably improve its material and economic circumstances.

Deteriorating conditions across the world today are, in many ways, a testament to the fact that the international community has yet to fully implement the commitments articulated in 1995. As the Second World Summit for Social Development approaches, the international community would therefore do well to look to localities where communities are becoming more resilient, safer, more cohesive, and healthier, to draw lessons about how such conditions can be fostered. Some thoughts on such a process of social transformation are offered below, drawing from experiences of Bahá'í communities around the world.



Women and girls from multiple generations study together in a Bahá'í community activity held in Brazil

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Communities can and do, through their own efforts, grow more cohesive and inclusive. But the types of societies we seek do not come about merely as a natural consequence of expanded access to material resources. Were this the case, the world's wealthiest nations would be models of equality, justice, sustainability, and social cohesion. Rather, such qualities must, themselves, be actively nurtured and prioritized. This has been consistently made evident in the grassroots experiences of the worldwide Bahá'í community. Experience also bears out the assertion of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, made some 30 years ago, that “our societies must respond more effectively to ... material and spiritual needs.”

“ ***Communities can and do, through their own efforts, grow more cohesive and inclusive.*** ”

Bahá'í communities around the world are striving to learn about how these two needs—one more concrete, the other less tangible—can be addressed in tandem and in support of one another. The experience of one grassroots Bahá'í-inspired

development organization is illustrative in this regard. Devoted to the advancement of rural women, this organization initially provided a variety of services that might be described as relatively conventional in development circles: arts and handicraft training, instruction in environmental and agricultural skills, literacy and numeracy education, and technical training in solar-powered cooking, food dehydration, and water purification.

The training equipped participants with skills that were undeniably helpful. When participants returned to their home villages, however, an unforeseen tendency emerged. When not understood within a wider context of contribution to the common good, the acquisition of such technical skills and resources often fomented competition—among participants of the program themselves, and between those participants and others in the village. Disagreements and hard feelings arose over who had access to which new technologies, whose handicrafts were more or less sophisticated, who was more or less confident in reading and arithmetic.



Women and girls from multiple generations study together in a Bahá'í community activity held in Brazil

Training offered through a skills-only approach proved prone to inadvertently fostering resentment, division, and assumptions of superiority, instead of solidarity, inclusion, and cohesion. Realizing this, organizers adjusted the program to augment technical and academic training with a robust exploration of spiritual and moral principles: for example, that truthfulness is a vital foundation for healthy social interaction; that collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance; and that prejudice of any kind blights the progress of humankind. Experience has repeatedly shown that as such principles increasingly permeate interactions among individuals, communities not only become more integrated, they also enjoy greater and greater capacity to advance their own social and economic development aims.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF WOMEN

UNIVERSAL EDUCATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR GLOBAL PROSPERITY

Since its beginnings, the Bahá'í Faith has emphasized universal education—particularly prioritizing the training of girls—as vital to the prosperity of any people. Yet women and girls have historically lacked equal access to education and professional development.

As a response to this reality, Bahá'í communities worldwide offer, at every stage of life, educational initiatives that equip participants with the skills and qualities needed for their own personal development and for the promotion of the well-being of their societies, as well as the capacity for earning a livelihood. They have established hundreds of community-based and private schools, tutorial centers, and universities, and have implemented literacy and specialized training programs engaging hundreds of thousands of participants.

In addition to the goal of academic excellence, these efforts are equally directed toward raising entire generations who embrace the inherent dignity of every individual, and who strive to apply the principle of gender equality in all their affairs.



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The sex distinction which exists in the human world is due to the lack of education for woman, who has been denied equal opportunity for development and advancement. Equality of the sexes will be established in proportion to the increased opportunities afforded woman in this age....

— Bahá'í holy writings

Education and Training for the Betterment of Society

A Contribution of the Bahá'í International Community to the 55th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—22 February 2011

That the education and training of women and girls is critical to the well-being and advancement of communities and nations has been definitively established. The benefits of such education have traditionally been framed in terms of economic growth, but material well-being is but one of many conditions that impinge on women's and girls' participation in the shaping of society. Achieving any meaningful and sustainable increase in this participation will require a more fundamental dialogue about the nature of development, “modernity,” and the organization of knowledge-generating activity.

The human being is not only an economic and social creature but also a spiritual one with free will and a conscience that enables the search for meaning and for truth. Without the freedom to pursue this fundamentally human quest, neither dignity, nor justice, nor development—in its full sense—is possible. The Bahá'í International Community understands development to be a global enterprise of enabling all individuals to develop inherent capacities and spiritual qualities,¹ and to contribute to the advancement of their community. Development is an enterprise that demands the efforts of both men and women working together to construct a social order characterized by justice, equity, reciprocity and collective prosperity. The systems of education, science, and technology, then, must be arranged in a way that reflects both the material and spiritual dimensions of the human being—permitting each person to play her or his rightful role in the betterment of society.

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The transformation of human society requires both the transformation of the individual and the deliberate creation of new societal structures.

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The division of the world into producers and users of knowledge is a deficient characteristic of the current world order—one with deep implications for the quality and legitimacy of education, science, and technology as well as governance and policy-making.

¹ Among others, these include the capacity to draw out diverse views and insights, the capacity to consider new perspectives with an open mind, the capacity to see diversity as a source of strength, the capacity to diagnose the situation of a local community and work towards a desired state, the capacity to elevate discourse to the level of moral or spiritual principle, and the capacity for self-expression. Spiritual qualities include trustworthiness, justice, honesty, integrity, selflessness, and humility.



Young people collaborate on a Bahá'í-inspired social action project in the United States

If most of humanity continues to be regarded as users of technology created elsewhere, it is unlikely that sustainable and meaningful development will take root.²

² Much like the organization of scientific activity in any given culture, technological activity is strongly influenced by cultural, social, economic, and political forces. For example, despite the fact that most agricultural work in developing countries is carried out by low-income women, the primary users and shapers of agricultural technologies in these countries have been men. A key challenge then is how to create the conditions and strengthen women's capacities to identify technological needs, and to create and adapt technologies in light of social needs and resource constraints. How can women move from being passive users of technologies developed elsewhere to active agents in shaping technologies that address the needs of their families and communities? How can the processes of technological development be shaped to better reflect the basic needs of the world's people, particularly those marginalized by current market forces? Such questions challenge us to consider "modern technology" in a different light—as technology that addresses locally defined needs and takes into account the material, social, and spiritual prosperity of society as a whole.



A teacher and student work together at the Bahá'í-inspired School of the Nations in Brasília, Brazil

If access to knowledge is the right of every human being, participation in its generation, application and diffusion is a responsibility that each individual must shoulder and be empowered to shoulder.³ Reforming the present flow of knowledge—from “North to South;” from urban to rural; from men to women—will free development from narrowly conceived conceptions of “modernization.”

The experience of the worldwide Bahá’í community in the field of education and community building has shown that several concepts are particularly salient to guiding educational processes, including curriculum development, towards their ultimate goal, namely the transformation of individuals and their communities. These concepts include:

- **Spiritual and moral education.** In the realm of education, spiritual and moral development has often been divorced from intellectual and vocational training. This division has often sprung from high-minded intentions of tolerance and respect. Yet it must be acknowledged that all societies are characterized by political, economic, and cultural interests that promote corrosive patterns of thought and behavior among young people. Imparting the ability to reflect on and apply spiritual, moral, and ethical principles will therefore be indispensable to the task of building a prospering world civilization.
- **Rethinking students, rethinking teachers.** Every educational program rests on fundamental assumptions about human nature. Achieving sustainable development will therefore hinge on rethinking underlying conceptions of both teachers and students. A child—far from an empty vessel waiting to be filled—must be seen as “a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,” their treasures being revealed and developed for the benefit of mankind only through the agency of education. Similarly teachers—their laudable profession far too long overlooked and underappreciated—must likewise acknowledge that if they wish to effect a transformation on the level of character as well as intellect, they must, before all else, embody and model the principles they teach.
- **Systematic learning and participation.** The concept of participation also emerges in a new light. Effective participation requires a systematic process of learning within each community, in a way that enables the community to identify its strengths and its needs; to experiment with new ideas and methods, new technologies and processes; and ultimately, become the primary agents of their development. One of the first steps in establishing participatory development is to promote the engagement of an increasing number of individuals in processes of learning—characterized by action, reflection on action, and collective deliberation—in a constant effort to generate and apply knowledge to improve the conditions of community life.

3 The question of how scientific and technological activity is to be organized so as to permit people everywhere to participate in such activity—is a central challenge of development. Much of the world is without access to science, girls and women in particular. For the most part, “modern” scientific knowledge is generated in universities and specialized research centers of industrialized countries, increasingly owned by private corporations. While institutions at the frontiers of modern science play an invaluable role, the application of knowledge for the purpose of improving human well-being in an equitable manner, requires the participation of an ever greater diversity of minds. We need to consider: What are the implications of the predominance of male-led research in the sciences? Would women ask different questions? Would they fund different research? Given that 95% of the new science in the world is created in countries comprising only one-fifth of the world’s population, what are the implications of the absence of the large number of countries and cultures in the production of scientific research?

- **Individual and social transformation.** The transformation of human society requires both the transformation of the individual and the deliberate creation of new societal structures. Individuals must be educated and empowered, but attention must be given to the cultural, scientific and technological, educational, economic and social conditions that shape them. The continuous interaction between the development of the individual and the establishment of new social structures provides a path of social change and avoids both complacency and violence.
- **Global solidarity.** The challenges associated with removing obstacles to education and training for girls and women will require a global governance system that promotes collective security, the promotion of human rights, environmental sustainability, and an equitable and just economic order. Among its distinguishing features will be adherence to the principle of collective trusteeship and the understanding that the advantage of any of its parts can best be secured through the advantage of the whole.

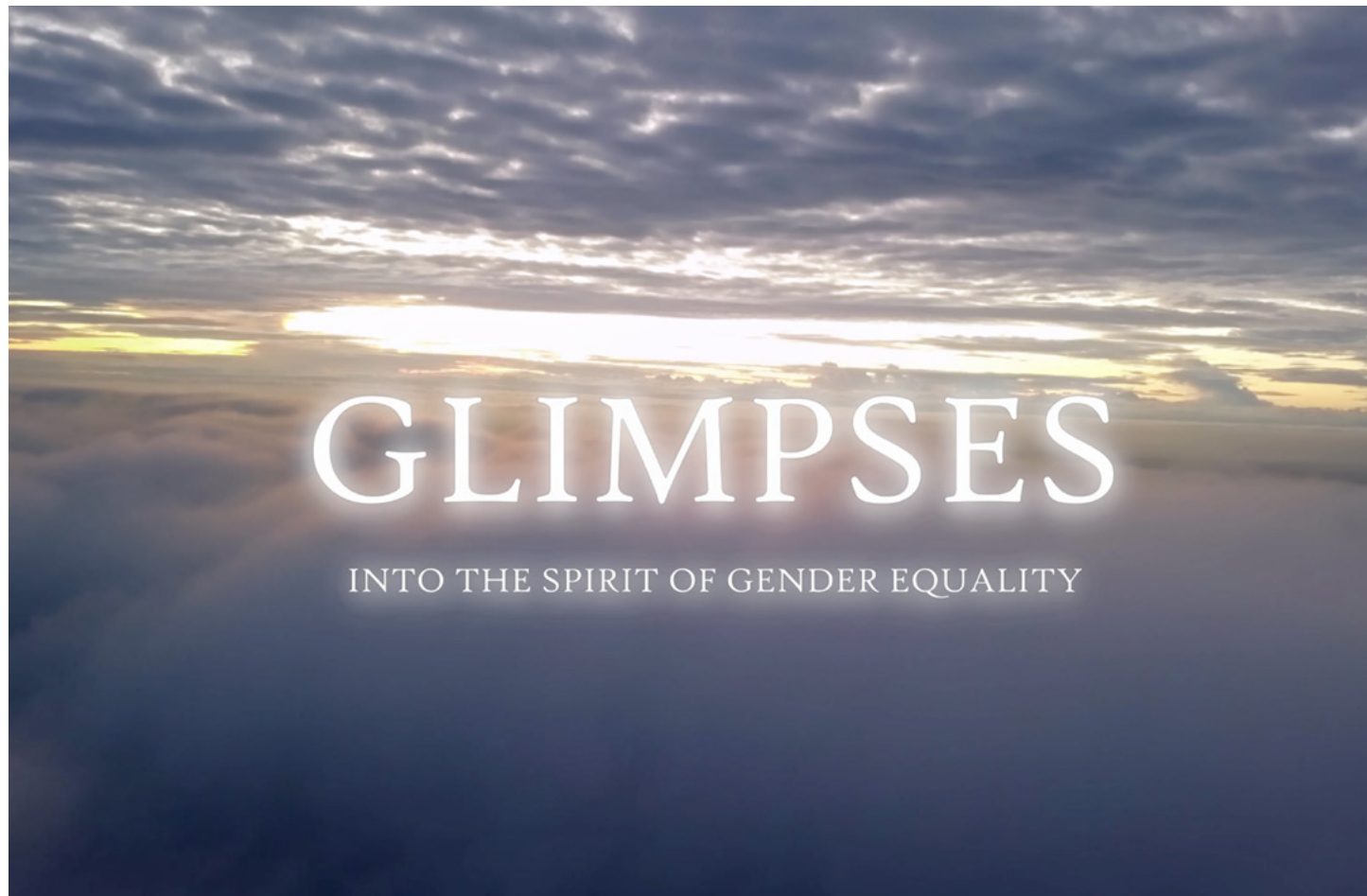
Enabling an increasing number of girls and women to access education and training, to play an active role in the production and application of science and technology is not solely a matter of technology or economics. Rather, it requires nations and communities to address a far wider range of assumptions about development, human nature, processes of knowledge generation and sharing, progress and modernity. Political agreements alone will prove insufficient, as will the strategies and tactics of pure pragmatism. Only when the equality of men and women—working side by side for the betterment of their communities—is raised to the level of principle can the true potential of the human spirit begin to be tapped. As principles of equity, justice, and generosity become the metrics of program evaluation, and human nature in its totality, rather than just its material dimension, is considered, will true development begin.

“ *Only when the equality of men and women—working side by side for the betterment of their communities—is raised to the level of principle can the true potential of the human spirit begin to be tapped.* ”

BIC releases feature length film, *Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality*

New York—3 February 2021

Today, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) launched a feature length film entitled *Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality*. Over 750 participants—including Ambassadors and representatives from the Permanent Missions of Comoros, Equatorial Guinea, France, Greece, Niger, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Slovakia, as well as United Nations officials and civil society representatives—viewed the 40 minute documentary, which reflects on advances made since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.



A documentary produced by the Bahá'í International Community highlights community efforts around the world to advance gender equality since 1995

“The aim of the BIC in creating this film is to showcase the spirit of diverse initiatives that have steadily contributed to cultural transformation at the local level in creating more equitable societies,” said Saphira Rameshfar, Representative of the BIC. “It also seeks to instill a sense of hope and optimism as we recommit our efforts within the UN toward the vital requirement of gender equality.”

Ambassador Inga Rhonda King, Permanent Representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to the UN, shared in her opening remarks at the event, “I see the screening of *Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality* as a moment and opportunity in which to explore our human capacity for compassion, justice, and collective responsibility, especially in light of changes occasioned by the pandemic. Gender equality does indeed require us to soar to the higher plane of the sublime.”

“***The aim of the BIC in creating this film is ... to instill a sense of hope and optimism as we recommit our efforts within the UN toward the vital requirement of gender equality.***”

Commenting on the film, Ambassador Issimail Chanfi, Permanent Representative of Comoros to the UN, said, “The film proposes a positive assessment on gender initiatives and progress made around the world and showcases the work and role of multilateralism in the process as much as the key work and role of local communities.”

Ambassador Michal Mlynár, Permanent Representative of Slovakia to the UN, shared, “The movie showcases great examples of advancement of women and girls from all corners of the world, and I hope it will contribute to the global understanding that all human beings are equal in their rights.”

The film highlights advances in gender equality seen in communities in Colombia, India, Malaysia, the United States, and Zambia, and explores conditions key to such advances.

An educational process that assists individuals to develop along physical, intellectual and spiritual dimensions is one such condition.

“If education is received in that holistic way, we can ... achieve great things,” explains Belkis Paz, an educator from Colombia featured in the film. “The setback in communities and culture is sometimes because a person is intellectually trained but is not prepared to make a good decision, to be fair with what he does, to be equitable, to be kind.”

“Ultimately, the film seeks to convey that the equality of men and women is a facet of human reality and not just a condition to be achieved for the common good,” noted Ms. Rameshfar.

Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality: Kejau, Malaysia

The following is part of a series exploring how Bahá'í communities have seen the principles of gender equality outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action begin to take form in neighborhoods and villages around the world.

New York—27 February 2020

Perched astride a mountaintop in the main range of Peninsular Malaysia, the village of Kejau is an hour's motorcycle ride from the nearest town and an hour's walk from the closest government primary school. Access to educational institutions has long been challenging. Yet a local process of education, spiritual and moral as much as intellectual and academic, is fueling widespread movement among its residents toward greater expressions of the equality of women and men.

“Education is our greatest concern for all our people,” says Nasir Bah Mandong, one of the village chiefs. “An hour's walk is too much for a little child, especially the girls. Most cannot make the journey until they are older. That is why we collectively started the community school—to give these children a head start.”



The film, Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality, visited communities at several locations, including Malaysia



The film, Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality, visited communities at several locations, including Malaysia

Faith in the capacity of local residents has been central to the development of the school, together with an associated network of neighborhood classes for the spiritual education of children. The school's first teacher was a local woman named Ovasah Yok Mapah who had not been able to complete her own secondary education because of obligations to care for her siblings and help with domestic chores.

Determined that girls should have opportunities equal to those of boys, she completed a series of courses focused on building capacity to teach children, and started the village's first class with six children in her own home. She subsequently trained four other teachers, who now help her run the school, which serves all the children in the village of several hundred.

“ ***Men are seeing women's growing capacity as a strength and an advantage, not as a threat to their traditional roles.*** ”

“It is important for girls as well as boys to have access to education,” says Jamil Eigau, chairperson of the local governing body of the Bahá'í community of Kejau. “No girl child should be illiterate, as they are the future mothers.”

Central to this process of education, grounded in the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, are a variety of concrete activities—including but not limited to classes for children—by which participants of any background learn to put spiritual principles into practice in their immediate surroundings.



The film, Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality, visited communities at several locations, including Malaysia

Gatherings for collective worship open to all, for example, have played a key role in overcoming age-old patterns of discrimination and prejudice, says Norisa Yok Phut Phut, an entrepreneur in Kejau.

“Before, only men conducted Sewang, the traditional prayer,” she explains. “Now the women in our village gather together to pray and study. We teach the prayers to our children to protect themselves as they travel through the jungle paths.”

She adds that the opportunity to learn prayers and holy writings in Semai, the traditional language of this group of indigenous Orang Asli people, has been a particularly transformative aspect of the educational process.

“This has helped many women build their capacity to participate more fully in community affairs. Now women also join the consultation. We can share our concerns and our views.”

Increasing awareness of the practical implications of gender equality is also influencing patterns of family life and traditional marriage practices, says Marjinie Deraoh, a coordinator of the community schools program in the Asli region of the country.

“In the past, marriage was contracted after the boy and the girl stayed together for three nights. This practice sometimes disadvantaged girls,” she explains. “But as we study more, this tradition began to change to one that honours the chastity of both boys and girls.”

Today the educational process is nurturing over 100 sustained and participant-led activities in Kejau alone, each committed to the equality of women and men as a truth of human reality. The result is a vibrant process of learning about how the principle of gender equality can be steadily translated into lived reality.

“Women are coming to understand that they can go far and have much to contribute to the environment they are living in,” says Goh Siew Chuan, an accountant from another village in the country participating in a course on improving family life.

“Men are seeing women’s growing capacity as a strength and an advantage, not as a threat to their traditional roles.” Her husband, Tee Yuu Hock, agrees. “Both are realizing the importance of the role that women can and will play in society, going forward.”

Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality: Mwinilunga, Zambia

The following is part of a series exploring how Bahá'í communities have seen the principles of gender equality outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action begin to take form in neighborhoods and villages around the world.

New York—4 March 2020

The path towards a more gender-equal society can take many forms. In the red-earth environs of Mwinilunga, a town in the northwest corner of Zambia, that path has centered on the spiritual empowerment of young adolescents.

“With the arrival of the junior youth program, parents began to see that whatever the boys could do, the girls could also do,” says Teckson, coordinator of an initiative called the junior youth spiritual empowerment program. “They began to question themselves about what was said to be only for boys or only for girls.”



The film, Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality, visited communities at several locations, including Zambia



The film, Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality, visited communities at several locations, including Zambia

The program he refers to helps “junior youth”, aged 12–15, analyze and recognize the influence of positive and negative forces operating in society, understand and describe with clarity the world around them, and build capacity to make meaningful contributions to the well-being of their community.

“ Changing perceptions of the capacity and contributions of adolescents—girls in particular—are impacting norms in areas ranging from education, to marriage, to choices about relationships. ”

“It helps them think about whatever they do and how it will impact others. It helps them to act with moderation,” says Vahid, a 20 year-old who facilitates a group of junior youth in a village in the area. “The texts they study encourage them to be patient and steadfast in the face of challenges. They grow in their ability to persevere and overcome problems over time.”

Changing perceptions of the capacity and contributions of adolescents—girls in particular—are impacting norms in areas ranging from education, to marriage, to choices about relationships.

“Often our girls would cut short their education to get married or because they were pregnant at an early age,” explains Josphine, a mother of junior youth in the program. “But now the girls themselves are able to say no to negative forces. There are fewer early pregnancies, and the girls can complete their education. Now we see girls at the forefront, even outranking the boys in their performance.”

With junior youth and the older teens and young adults that often work with them leading the way, views and norms are transforming across the community. “Men used to have all the say in family decisions,” says Emeldah, another mother of junior youth in the community. “But now these roles are not so strict. Now the woman is free to share her ideas in the house, and the husband is able to listen and learn from the wife.”

Transformative as the empowerment of women can be on an individual level, it is equally critical to the progress of society as a whole. “For a country to develop, we need the contributions of both boys and girls,” says Loloji, headmaster of a primary school in one of the villages surrounding Mwinilunga.

“Previously more boys were educated than girls,” he explains. “But we need to include more girls, so they also can participate in the development of the country. We need more women to participate.”

Junior youth understand well the role that is theirs to play in such development. Indeed, a growing sense of their own ability to make meaningful change in society is a key ingredient of the process under way.

“Members of the community take us more seriously now. They no longer wait for us to become adults to help in the community,” explains Scovy, a junior youth in the program.

“We now engage more actively in service to the community. And we find service to be wonderful.”

Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality: Hasankheda, India

The following is part of a series exploring how Bahá'í communities have seen the principles of gender equality outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action begin to take form in neighborhoods and villages around the world.

New York—20 February 2020

In rural areas of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the day begins at first light or before. Work in the home and family fields unfolds according to rhythms sometimes hundreds of years in the making, and the influence of tradition is strong. But as they engage in a systematic exploration of the nobility of every human soul, residents in the village of Hasankheda are building new ways to relate to and interact with one another, women and men alike.

“Earlier there was a strong culture of Purdah here in the village,” says Reena, 32, referring to a custom whereby women are required to cover their head and face in front of men. In many cases the system extends to women being forced to stay inside their homes for years and sometimes even decades on end.

“Visiting neighbors or friends was very rare. Women never stepped out of their houses.”

Recently though, a fuller array of aspirations have begun impressing themselves on the consciousness of the community. Reena says that growing numbers are realizing that “this Purdah system is not more important than the education of children. Or letting women step out of the house. Or having consultations with each other. 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 their lives.”

The process under way ... is not so much about rejecting what has come before. Rather, it is about creating new options for women and girls—options to be internalized by women and men, young and old alike.

A process of education that hones both intellectual and spiritual capacities has been central to this transformation, says Reena.

She operates a primary school inspired by the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, serving some 80 children in the village. But she says that less formal neighborhood-based classes for the spiritual and moral education of young people, several of which she teaches herself, have been central to the process.



The film, Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality, visited communities at several locations, including India

“We explained to parents that this is a program for children where they will imbibe spiritual education,” she relates. Parents came to realize that their children were striving to contribute to the common good, and that “they are able to apply these spiritual qualities not only in their own lives but also very effectively in the society.”

“They realized that their children derive immense joy in helping others.”

Change has come not only from children participating in classes, but by older youth and adults undergoing training to offer the classes to their neighbors and acquaintances. As participants progress through the training’s sequence of courses, they are assisted to undertake increasingly complex acts of service, such as visiting someone in her or his home to explore a theme of social or spiritual importance, or assisting a group of young adolescents to explore the positive and negative forces impacting their community.

One form of service that has had particular influence on norms in Hasankheda has been gatherings for neighbors to pray and discuss the implications of spiritual principles. Though simple and informal—often held in participants’ homes—such spaces have become a locus for the loosening of age-old gender restrictions. These devotional gatherings, as they are called, are one of the few activities in which the possibility of women leaving their houses has found acceptance in the community. During the gatherings, women are starting to remove the scarves

that cover their faces. They are also increasingly visiting one another's homes to extend invitations to those not yet attending a gathering.

As spaces that welcome participants of all backgrounds to discuss, worship, and eat together, devotional gatherings are also proving instrumental in breaking down caste prejudices. Reena's own life testifies to the possibilities that can open up with movement in this direction. A member of the merchant class from a larger urban area, Reena met her future husband, who came from a lower caste family in the countryside, at a training in this educational process.

The couple had to wait three years to receive blessings from both sets of parents for the union. Today, however, their partnership speaks to the transformation that communities of any kind can advance. And the steadfast support of her husband and others like him, both moral and practical, demonstrates the role that men are increasingly ready to play. The process under way, Reena says, is not so much about rejecting what has come before. Rather, it is about



The film, Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality, visited communities at several locations, including India



The film, Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality, visited communities at several locations, including India

creating new options for women and girls—options to be internalized by women and men, young and old alike. “The most outstanding feature you see nowadays is that women are more conscious about the education of their children, especially girls,” she says.

“They say that they were not able to get a proper education, which they regret. But they want to make sure that their children are not deprived of education. For this, they are ready to move out of the confines of their houses to speak with the teachers, and send their children to school.”

Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality: New York City, United States

The following is part of a series exploring how Bahá'í communities have seen the principles of gender equality outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action begin to take form in neighborhoods and villages around the world.

New York—11 March 2020

Behind the twinkling lights and soaring towers of New York City is a local community rich and vibrant in its diversity. Like any locality, relationships between women and men there take a variety of forms, some more constructive than others. But growing numbers, including young parents just beginning their families, are thinking deeply about how the equality of women and men can find greater expression with each successive generation.

“We recently became parents, so that really brought in a whole new element of what housework looks like if you’re striving for gender equality,” says Kimia, an artist in the city. “What income looks like. What childcare looks like.” “The biggest barrier remains the expectation of what equality really means,” adds Kenny, her husband. “How do we as a couple, and as a family, address that expectation?”

For some, reconceptualizing what it means to be a man or a woman in a North American society is a key priority.



The film, Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality, visited communities at several locations, including the United States



*The film, *Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality*, visited communities at several locations, including the United States*

“We’re still exploring what healthy masculinity is,” says Penn, an actor and producer.

“Our male-dominated structures are too rigid. They’re calcified,” he explains, noting the need for more integrated and responsive conceptions. “What kind of strength is it to be elastic? To bend? To be receptive?”

Fostering a wide range of qualities, both those traditionally identified as masculine and as feminine, takes on very practical dimensions for the parents of young children.

“One of the things we both think about a lot in raising our son is cultivating his gentleness,” says Haley, a creative strategist and consultant.

“ ***Fostering a wide range of qualities, both those traditionally identified as masculine and as feminine, takes on very practical dimensions for the parents of young children.*** ”

She explains that many people appreciate her son’s traditionally masculine qualities of boldness, courage, and energy. But she sees his qualities of thoughtfulness, observation, and compassion as being just as important. “I don’t want any one thing to mean that he can’t be the other.”

Haley’s husband, Lucas, notes that childrearing is something that is profoundly unifying at a global level.

“Raising our son is one of the things that I do as a member of the human race,” he says.

“Starting a family feels like beginning to participate in a dialogue that exists across the entire world. It’s not something that exists in America, or something that exists in Asia. It’s something that we all do together.”

WOMEN AND HEALTH

UNIVERSAL EDUCATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR GLOBAL PROSPERITY

Bahá'ís hold a firm conviction that the harmonious interaction between scientific knowledge and ethical principles is an essential requirement for the physical, spiritual, and mental health of people. Today, restricted access to adequate health services remains a significant barrier to the full flourishing and equal participation of many women and girls. Additionally, biological differences—for instance, menstruation—have been misused across many cultures to justify discrimination and to exclude women from active engagement in society, or have formed the basis for many harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation.

Limited access to health services remains a significant barrier which demands reallocation of resources and a concerted effort to address underlying prejudices. From Canada to India, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Romania, Bahá'í communities—informed by scientific and spiritual sources of knowledge—have devised campaigns and programs that promote healthy habits, address discriminatory health practices, and train community health workers. In some localities, Bahá'ís have established modest hospitals, clinics, and medical associations.



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... those present should concern themselves with every means of training the girl children; with teaching the various branches of knowledge....

Let them also study whatever will nurture the health of the body and its physical soundness, and how to guard their children from disease.

— Bahá'í holy writings

Striving Towards Justice: Transforming the Dynamics of Human Interaction

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 53rd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—28 February 2009

The equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women is an integral component of the establishment of relationships rooted in justice—relationships, which underlie the well-being and development of individuals, families and communities. There can be no doubt that, in this day, the equality of men and women—manifested in part through a just and equal sharing of responsibilities—is attainable and urgently needed. While many of the world's governments have committed to the promotion of an equal partnership between men and women in family, community, and public life, individuals continue to struggle against entrenched patterns of dominance and violence that characterize much of human interaction.

The goal of sharing responsibilities raises questions about the nature and purpose of human life and how these inform the scope and allocation of responsibilities. The worldwide Bahá'í community is guided by its recognition of the essential nobility of every human being—the capacity to develop spiritually and intellectually and to become a source of support and advantage to others. We see each individual as the possessor of inestimable talents, which, through education, can be developed and manifested in service to the common good. Furthermore, while men and women are physically distinct, their spiritual identities are equal—the soul has no gender. Each one, then, must play a role in striving for the well-being of others and, ultimately, in co-creating a social order that fosters the spiritual and material well-being of all peoples.

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We see each individual as the possessor of inestimable talents, which, through education, can be developed and manifested in service to the common good.

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In this collective endeavor, the individual, the community and the institutions of society play an important role. It is, in fact, not possible to separate an individual from his or her environment and seek to reform one without the other; one's inner life molds the environment and is itself deeply affected by it. The downward spiral of family disintegration; the lack of labor and educational opportunities for women; the proliferation of single female or child-headed households; female feticide; the isolation of the elderly women; and the persistent violence against girls and women are all symptoms of a social order which has yet to harness the capacity for collaboration, service, excellence, and justice latent in every human being. To the extent that government policies and programs recognize that institutional and social change must



A Bahá'í children's class gathers in Istanbul, nurturing spiritual education and community among young families in Turkey's largest city

be accompanied by a transformation of human values, will they be able to effect abiding changes in the dynamics that characterize the allocation of responsibilities, including care-giving, between men and women.

At the level of the individual, change will require a fundamental rethinking in the way that boys are socialized to become men and how this socialization is carried over into family, community, and public life. Differential child-rearing strategies, parental expectations as well as the abusive treatment of female family members have long perpetuated males' sense of privilege and superiority. Furthermore, they have contributed to narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity, the devaluation of the contributions made by women and to the perpetuation of patterns of dominance, oppression, as well as poverty.

Recognizing the need for a fundamental transformation of attitudes and behaviors—to effect change in the dynamics of human interaction—the worldwide Bahá'í community has focused on the spiritual and moral education of children, helping them to form a strong moral identity and the capacity to demonstrate the principle of the equality of men and women. A particular emphasis has been placed on the education of children, aged 12-15—the junior youth. At this pivotal age, young people are beginning to develop a sense of personal moral responsibility and decision making,



A Bahá'í children's class gathers in Istanbul, nurturing spiritual education and community among young families in Turkey's largest city

are refining their critical thinking skills, and are eager to explore the many issues to which their consciences are slowly awakening. In many parts of the world, they already bear the weight of life's hardships and have the ability to think deeply about the world around them. As they navigate this critical period in their lives, they must be given the tools to recognize the moral issues underlying the choices they make.

This stage of development presents an important opportunity for parents, communities, and institutions to help young people not only to develop a positive identity but also to elevate their thinking and to adopt an outward-looking orientation, which inspires them to work towards the betterment of their communities. For boys, efforts in this direction should provide, among other things, the tools to develop the moral courage to take on new roles and responsibilities, especially those traditionally associated with the contributions of girls; for girls, such efforts should provide the tools to discover and to begin to develop their broad-ranging capacities in all arenas of human endeavor.

The emphasis on the transformation of attitudes is also reflected in the decisions of several United Nations agencies to work with faith-based organizations to achieve gender equality. In 2008, for example, both UNFPA¹

¹ The United Nations Food and Population Fund.



Bahá'í community initiatives in Jordan promote service, unity and learning across diverse communities and generations

and UNIFEM² made strides in this direction: UNFPA brought together over 100 faith-based organizations and religious leaders to discuss collaboration in areas of gender and development issues;³ UNIFEM launched a new partnership with 'Religions for Peace' in the 'Say No to Violence Against Women' campaign, which seeks to engage faith communities worldwide to lead efforts to end violence against women. The decision to engage with faith-based organizations signals a search for new ways of thinking and approaching the conditions perpetuating unjust relationships between men and women—specifically, ways informed by spiritual and moral dimensions of human life.

² The United Nations Development Fund for Women.

³ In 2007, the Fund began a more intensive effort to consolidate networks of faith-based partnerships to address pressing, shared concerns, such as the AIDS epidemic, gender-based violence, the empowerment of women, reduction in maternal mortality, and assistance in humanitarian crises.

Guided by these dimensions, the efforts of the Bahá'í community to address gender equality have also attended closely to the manner in which this goal is pursued. A distinguishing feature of Bahá'í initiatives is that they unfold within a broader goal of preserving and strengthening the unity of the family and of society. The methods employed take into consideration the cultural patterns of society and adopt an evolutionary view of change; they emphasize encouragement, collective decision making, the building of trust, and a complementarity—rather than sameness—of roles.

One example of these principles in action is the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in Indore, India, which focuses on empowering disadvantaged rural and tribal girls and women. The Institute uses a life-cycle approach to provide holistic training programs, which teach and encourage men and women to demonstrate equality in the home, at school, at work as well as in community, religious, and public life. The curriculum takes a culturally sensitive approach that seeks to eradicate entrenched attitudes which perpetuate oppressive and violent relationships. While the curriculum tackles issues such as alcohol abuse, violence, HIV/AIDS, and exploitation, these are understood as the symptoms rather than the problem itself. The primary aim, then, is to address underlying values and attitudes, which are primary obstacles to establishing more just relationships. The subjects addressed by the curriculum include: sharing parental responsibilities; the equality of husband and wife; the education of girls; the use of non-adversarial decision making; and service to the community. Couples who have completed the curriculum have noted a greater sense of unity in the family; a reduction or cessation of physical violence; a greater ability to express their thoughts at home and in public; and an increasing practice of consulting together to resolve family problems.

In conclusion, we encourage governments gathered at the Commission on the Status of Women to:

- consider the spiritual and moral dimensions of attitudes and interactions that have shaped the unjust divisions of responsibilities between men and women;
- consider the roles that the individuals, communities, and institutions of society must play and the interaction between them in order to effect a more just allocation of responsibilities;
- give special attention to the education of young people aged 12-15, who are leaving behind childhood and undergoing profound change, both morally and intellectually; and
- consider drawing on the skills and capacities of faith-based organizations to work towards a transformation of attitudes and behaviors.

Women and Health

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 43rd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—1 March 1999

The Bahá'í International Community is pleased that women's health was identified as a critical area of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action and that the Commission on the Status of Women is focusing global attention on this vital issue. The Bahá'í International Community, which actively collaborates with the World Health Organization, UNICEF, UNIFEM, and other UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on promoting women's health, participated most recently in the Expert Group Meeting on Women and Health: Mainstreaming the Gender Perspective into the Health Sector, held in Tunisia in September-October 1998.

“Women’s health is important not only to women but to their families, their communities, and the world as a whole.”

As the Commission consults about actions that governments, UN agencies, and NGOs might take to improve the health of women, and to empower women to participate fully in the affairs of the world, we offer the following points for consideration.

- When women enter the arenas of law and politics and when their voices are heard in the council chambers of the world, they will be instrumental in ending war and freeing vast resources for peaceful pursuits. “The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war,” the Bahá'í Writings assert, “will be consecrated to such ends as to the extermination of disease, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of humanity.”
- Women’s health is important not only to women but to their families, their communities, and the world as a whole. In the Bahá'í view, the very progress of civilization depends on the unconstrained participation of women in all aspects of social life. Participation requires that women and girls be assisted and encouraged to develop all of their capacities and that they maintain the ongoing physical, emotional, and spiritual health essential to contribute as equal partners with men to the advancement of civilization.
- Avoidable causes of maternal morbidity and mortality, HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis, depressive disorders, and violence against women take a heavy toll on the whole community. Women play fundamental roles in the



Bahá'í communities worldwide formed task forces and relief funds to coordinate pandemic aid and support families in need at every level

education of children and in promoting the health of the family both in the home and through organizations that promote and protect the health and well-being of the community. Healthy families and communities cannot be achieved without careful attention to creating conditions conducive to sustaining healthy girls and women.

- Consideration must be given to the health of women throughout their lifespan. They must be ensured adequate nutrition, especially in the early years, and protected from harmful traditional practices through the teenage years and into adulthood. The health of older women must also be paid special attention. With the marked increase in life expectancy for women, their right to physical, mental, and spiritual health must be safeguarded. The Bahá'í International Community has been active in the process of improving the health of women and girls. Much of this work includes raising awareness of the rights of women and girls, raising the discussion of issues to the level of principle, and applying those standards at the local, national, and global levels. We stand ready to continue to protect and promote the health of women and girls and are eager to collaborate with the Commission on the Status of Women, other UN agencies and NGOs in doing whatever will enable women to contribute their share to the advancement of civilization.

“The world of humanity has two wings - one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible.”

Perspective | Gender equality and the constructive role of religion in responding to COVID-19: A Bahá'í perspective

By Saphira Rameshfar

New York—21 April 2021



As the Generation Equality Forum builds off its Mexico City segment and sets the stage for Paris in June, many are taking stock of the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls. They are seeking not just to catalog the many burdens it has imposed—the “shadow pandemic” of gender-based violence, the gendered economic impacts of the crisis, the explosion of unpaid care work—but also to understand what factors have allowed individual women and entire communities to respond with resilience and strength.

Personal faith and religious affiliation are lenses through which many have analyzed responses to the pandemic. The experience of the Bahá'í Faith provides further insight into ways that religion, as a system of knowledge, meaning, value, and action, can assist women and men to respond to social crises, particularly in light of pre-existing conditions of gender inequality.

Beginning in March of 2020, the Universal House of Justice, the world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, released a series of messages in light of the rapidly evolving health crisis. These communications were grounded in a set of initiatives, pursued over the past quarter-century by the Bahá'í community and like-minded collaborators, that seek to build capacity in individuals, communities, and institutions to contribute to the constructive transformation of society.

These efforts center on a worldwide, decentralized process of spiritual and moral education, open to all. Structured in stages, this system tends to the moral education of children, facilitates the spiritual empowerment of young adolescents, and allows increasing numbers of youth and adults to explore the application of spiritual teachings to daily life and challenges facing society.

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... seeing women taking on positions of increasing responsibility, visibility, and decision making has also assisted men—and not infrequently challenged them—to rethink inherited assumptions about gender roles.”

The equality of women and men is explicit in the system's approach and curriculum. It also informs its central objective of building capacity for social change. Many women who enter its educational programs as participants gain the vision, confidence, and skills necessary to begin leading activities themselves. As their experience expands, a percentage begin coordinating the efforts of others, at levels ranging from the neighborhood to the national. As they become increasingly

valued resources recognized in the local community, women’s conceptions of themselves and their contribution to society can shift significantly. As importantly, seeing women taking on positions of increasing responsibility, visibility, and decision making has also assisted men—and not infrequently challenged them—to rethink inherited assumptions about gender roles.

This pattern of action provided a key framework through which the worldwide Bahá’í community responded to the pandemic. Having women already playing strong institutional roles and participating actively in decision-making spaces, for example, allowed communities to benefit from traditionally “feminine” qualities as well as more “masculine” ones, often resulting in significant attention being directed toward areas such as care for families, the elderly, the vulnerable, and children. This was especially notable in areas where women’s voices have historically been marginalized.



In Honduras, Bahá’í volunteers distribute protective equipment and supplies to support communities affected by storms and the pandemic

Growing commitment to—and practice of—women and men consulting together as equals also affected relationships between spouses. It assisted many wives, husbands, and families to navigate the challenges raised by the pandemic more collaboratively, generously, and ultimately more effectively. This is not to say that long-standing patterns of gender bias have been eradicated from Bahá'í homes and hearts. Rather, embracing gender equality as an explicit objective and fundamental truth of human reality, grounded in one's advancing understanding of the Divine Will, impacted how difficulties were navigated, both individually and collectively.

At the broadest level, the Bahá'í community's response to the pandemic has been grounded in a consciously outward-looking orientation. In recent years the Universal House of Justice has focused the Bahá'í world on a vision of empowering every individual and community to become a protagonist in the process of building a new and better world, each one "resourceful and resilient." In that first message in March of 2020, as COVID-19 was racing around the world and places like Northern Italy and New York City seemed to be tottering on the brink, it urged Bahá'ís:

"May your minds be ever bent upon the needs of the communities to which you belong, the condition of the societies in which you live, and the welfare of the entire family of humanity, to whom you are all brothers and sisters."



In Romania, a Bahá'í-inspired foundation runs two clinics in Bucharest, offering care to patients without access to health insurance

This focus on constructive action and service to a higher good endowed the Bahá'í community with significant resilience and adaptation to the disruptions of COVID-19. This can be understood as an expression of constructive resilience, the notion that whatever happens to us and whatever challenges we might face, we are never reduced to the category of victim alone. Human beings always have the capacity to contribute meaningfully to an ever-advancing civilization, should we choose it, and the hope and purpose found in that contribution are always available to us. This is an idea that had arisen primarily in the context of the Bahá'í community of Iran, where generations of believers have faced widespread and state-sponsored persecution. But ironically—or perhaps providentially—in the context of a global pandemic, the concept became relevant to virtually all of humanity, not least to women and girls facing a host of uniquely gendered challenges.

The long-term disruptions wrought by COVID-19 are still becoming apparent. The work of responding to them and other global challenges will stretch into the foreseeable future. Using the experiences of the worldwide Bahá'í community, I have tried to highlight some aspects of the role that religion can play not only in advancing the position of women and girls under crisis conditions, but also in empowering women and men alike to work shoulder to shoulder towards a more gender-equal and flourishing society. At its highest, religion helps humanity locate itself in a larger movement toward a better and truer world. In that regard, I close with one more excerpt from that first message from the Universal House of Justice in the wake of COVID-19:

“However difficult matters are at present, and however close to the limits of their endurance some sections of societies are brought, humanity will ultimately pass through this ordeal, and it will emerge on the other side with greater insight and with a deeper appreciation of its inherent oneness and interdependence.”

* * *

This piece is a personal reflection of Saphira Rameshfar, Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations between 2015 and 2023.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

SAFEGUARDING INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE INTEGRITY

The Bahá'í holy writings affirm that all human beings are created noble and should be treated with the utmost dignity and respect. Yet as rapidly shifting economic, political, and environmental stressors abound, and entire societies are unbearably strained by upheaval, an alarming epidemic of violence, especially gender-based violence against women, is on the rise. Governments have an urgent responsibility to punish and prevent the exploitation of and violence against women and girls by enacting protective legislation and rigorously implementing legal and institutional reforms.

At the same time, Bahá'ís are learning how moral education programs and community-building activities that foster cohesion and an appreciation for the integrity of every human being can shift norms among individuals and communities—replacing patriarchal tendencies such as dominance, prejudice, and coercion with constructive relational dynamics such as mutual respect, collaboration, trustworthiness, and compassion.

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The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced.

— Bahá'í holy writings

Beyond Legal Reforms: Culture and Capacity in the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls

New York—2 July 2006

By many measures, the status of women and girls has improved significantly over the last 50 years. They have achieved higher rates of literacy and education, increased their per capita income, and risen to prominent roles in professional and political spheres. Moreover, extensive local, national, and global networks of women have succeeded in putting women's concerns on the global agenda and catalyzed the creation of legal and institutional mechanisms to address these concerns. Notwithstanding the positive developments, a relentless epidemic of violence against women and girls, perpetuated by social norms, religious fanaticism, and exploitative economic and political conditions, continues to wreak havoc in every corner of the world. As the international community struggles to



A junior youth empowerment group at a school in India fosters moral reasoning, purpose and collaboration among young adolescents



The BIC's Principal Representative, Bani Dugal, gives opening remarks at a 2025 roundtable on women's role in peacebuilding and mediation

implement laws to protect women and girls, it is evident that a massive divide still separates the legal apparatus and the culture, embodied in our values, behaviors and institutions, required to stem the epidemic.

“ ***... the challenge now before the international community is how to create the social, material, and structural conditions in which women and girls can develop to their full potential.*** ”

The alarming violence against women and girls takes place against the backdrop of two simultaneous processes that characterize the present global condition. The first is a process of disintegration, which in every continent and every arena of human life reveals the impotence of outworn institutions, obsolescent doctrines and discredited traditions, and leads to chaos and decline in the social order. The deterioration of the ability of religions to exercise a moral influence has left in its wake a moral vacuum filled by extremist voices and material conceptions of reality that deny the dignity of human life. An exploitative economic order, fuelling the extremes of wealth and poverty, has pushed millions of women into positions of economic slavery and denied their rights to property, inheritance, physical security, and equal participation in the productive enterprise. Ethnic conflicts and failing states have swelled the number of women migrants and refugees, forcing them into positions of yet greater physical and economic insecurity. Within the home and community, the high incidence of violence within the family, the increase in degrading treatment of women and children, and the spread of sexual abuse have accelerated this decline.

Alongside a pattern of deterioration, a second constructive and unifying process can be discerned. Rooted in the ethic of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and fuelled by a growing solidarity of women's efforts around the world, the last 15 years have succeeded in putting the issue of violence against women and girls on the global agenda. The extensive legal and normative framework developed during this time has brought to the attention of a distracted international community, the culture of impunity within which such abuse was tolerated and even condoned. 1993, the landmark UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defined violence as:

“Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”¹

This definition challenged the fallacious notion that violence against women and girls was a private matter. The home, the family, one's culture and tradition were no longer to be the final arbiters of just action where violence against girls or women was concerned. The subsequent appointment of a Special Rapporteur on violence against women provided yet another mechanism for investigating and bringing the many dimensions of this crisis to the attention of the international community.

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... the international community needs to dramatically increase the power, authority, and resources dedicated to women's human rights, gender equality, and women's empowerment.

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Despite major advances in the last 15 years, the failure of nations to decrease the violence has laid bare the shortcomings of a primarily reactive approach and has gradually come to embrace the broader goal of prevention of violence in the first place. Framed differently, the challenge now before the international community is how to create the social, material, and structural conditions in which women and girls can develop to their full potential. The creation of such conditions will involve not only deliberate attempts to change the legal, political, and economic structures of society, but, equally importantly, will require the transformation of individuals, men and women, boys and girls, whose values, in different ways, sustain exploitative patterns of behavior. From the Bahá'í perspective, the essence of any program of social change is the understanding that the individual has a spiritual or moral dimension. This shapes their understanding of their life's purpose, their responsibilities towards the family, the community and the world. Alongside critical changes in the legal, political, and economic architecture slowly taking shape, the development of individuals' moral and spiritual capabilities is an essential element in the as yet elusive quest to prevent the abuse of women and girls around the world.

The idea of promoting specific morals or values may be a controversial one; too often in the past such efforts have been associated with repressive religious practices, oppressive political ideologies, and narrowly defined visions of the

1 United Nations General Assembly resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, Article 2. UN Document A/RES/48/104.



Eleanor Roosevelt holds the English version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in November 1949, a year after its adoption (UN Photo)

common good. However, moral capabilities, when articulated in a manner consistent with the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and aimed at fostering the spiritual, social, and intellectual development of all persons, represent a key element of the kind of transformation required for a non-violent society to take shape. Moreover, such capabilities must be anchored in the central social and spiritual principle of our time, namely the interdependence and interconnectedness of humanity as a whole. The goal of moral development, then, is shifted from individualistic notions of “salvation” to embrace the collective progress of the entire human race. As our understanding of the world’s social and physical systems has evolved to embrace this paradigm, so too must we develop the moral capabilities required to function ethically in the age in which we live.

How does this translate into educational objectives? A number of Bahá’í schools and institutions of higher education have identified specific moral capabilities which help to equip children and youth to develop skills of moral reasoning and to assume the responsibility of contributing to the betterment of their communities. The basis for such curricula is the belief that every person is a spiritual being with limitless potential for noble action but that potential, in order to manifest, must be consciously cultivated through a curriculum attuned to this fundamental human dimension. Among the moral capabilities identified by Bahá’í educational institutions include the ability to: participate effectively in non-adversarial collective decision making (this includes the transformation of exploitative patterns of behavior based on the use of force and falsely rooted in the idea of conflict as a mainstay of human interaction); to act with rectitude of conduct based on ethical and moral principles; to cultivate one’s sense of dignity and self-worth; to take initiative in a creative, disciplined form; to commit to empowering educational activities; to create a vision of a desired future based on shared values and principles, and to inspire others to work for its fulfillment; to understand relationships based on dominance and to contribute towards their transformation into relationships based on reciprocity and service. In this way, the curriculum seeks to develop the individual as a whole integrating the spiritual

and the material, the theoretical and the practical, and the sense of individual progress with service to the community. While such values can be taught in schools, it is the family environment in which children grow and form views about themselves, the world, and the purpose of life. To the degree that a family fails to meet the fundamental needs of the children, to that same degree will society be burdened with the consequences of neglect and abuse and will suffer greatly from the resulting conditions of apathy and violence. In the family, the child learns about the nature of power and its expression in interpersonal relationships; it is here that she first learns to accept or reject authoritarian rule and violence as a means of expression and conflict resolution. In this environment, the widespread violence committed by men



A short film by the Bahá'í International Community was shown at the 'Room for Optimism' event during the 2024 UN Summit of the Future

against women and girls constitutes an assault on the foundational unit of the community and the nation. The state of equality in the family and in the marriage requires an ever-increasing ability to integrate and unite rather than to separate and individualize. In a rapidly changing world, where families find themselves unbearably strained under the pressures of shifting environmental, economic, and political upheavals, the ability to maintain the integrity of the family bond and to prepare children for citizenship in a complex and shrinking world takes on paramount importance. It is imperative, then, to help men as fathers understand their responsibilities in a family beyond economic well-being to include setting an example of healthy male-female relations, of self-discipline and equal respect for the male and female members of the family. This is a complementary role to that of the mother, who is the first educator of her children and whose happiness, sense of security, and self-worth is essential to her capacity to parent effectively.

What children learn in the family is either confirmed or contradicted by the social interactions and values that shape their community life. All adults in the community, educators, health workers, entrepreneurs, political representatives, religious leaders, police officers, media professionals, and the like, share a responsibility for the protection of children. In so many cases, however, the protective web of community life appears irreparably torn: millions of women and

girls are trafficked every year and subjected to forced prostitution and slavery-like conditions; migrant workers face a double marginalization as females and as migrants, suffering mental, physical, and economic abuse at the hands of their employers in an informal economy; violence against older women, whose numbers have risen and who often lack the means for self-protection, has greatly increased; child pornography has spread like a virus feeding the appetite of a seamless, unregulated global market; in many countries, even the act of getting to and attending school has put girls at a tremendous risk for physical and sexual abuse. Exacerbating the conditions brought on by weak states and the failure of law enforcement, is the profoundly moral dilemma that forces the community to ask: what moves an individual to exploit the life and dignity of another human being? What fundamental moral capacity has the family and community failed to cultivate?

Across the world, religions have traditionally played a defining role in cultivating the values of a community. Yet today, many voices raised in the name of religion constitute the most formidable obstacle to eradicating violent and exploitative behaviors perpetrated against women and girls. Using religious appeals as a vehicle for their own power, proponents of extremist religious interpretations have sought to “tame” women and girls by limiting their mobility outside of the home, limiting their access to education, subjecting their bodies to harmful traditional practices, controlling attire, and even killing to punish acts which were claimed to abase the family honor. It is religion itself that stands in desperate need of renewal. A core element of such renewal is the need for religious leaders to state unequivocally and become the standard bearers of the principle of equality of men and women, a moral and practical principle urgently needed to realize progress in the social, political, and economic spheres of society. Today, religious practices and doctrines in flagrant violation of international human rights standards must be subject to deeper examination and scrutiny, bearing in mind that all religions contain the voices of women, which have often been absent from the evolving definition of what religion is and what it requires.

The individual, her family and community environment are ultimately under the protection of the state; it is at this level that enlightened and responsible leadership is desperately required. Most governments, however, continue to abdicate their international obligations to punish and prevent the violence and exploitation of women and girls; many lack the political will; some fail to allocate adequate resources to implement the laws; in many countries specialized services addressing violence against women and girls do not exist; and work on prevention has in almost all contexts been limited to local short-term measures.² In fact, few states can claim even the smallest reduction in overall prevalence.³ Many states continue to hide behind cultural and religious reservations to international treaties condemning this violence further perpetuating a climate of legal and moral impunity rendering the violence and its victims largely invisible.

The era of developing legal frameworks must now be followed by an emphasis on implementation and prevention. The foundation of such measures is a strategy rooted in the education and training of children in a way that enables them to

2 United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (2005). *Report of the Expert Group Meeting: Good practices in combating and eliminating violence against women*. 17-20 May 2005, Vienna Austria. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw-gp-2005/docs/FINALREPORT.goodpractices.pdf>.

3 Ibid.

grow intellectually as well as morally, cultivating in them a sense of dignity as well as a responsibility for the well-being of their family, community, and the world. From a budgetary perspective, prevention involves the deliberate adoption

of gender-specific measures to ensure that an adequate proportion of resources is allocated towards the provision of accessible social services and law enforcement. Such efforts must be reinforced by clear definitions of violence, as well as comprehensive data collection methods in order to evaluate national efforts in this area, and to raise awareness among men and women of the gravity and prevalence of violence occurring in their community.

The international community, despite its important leadership on this issue through the 1993 Declaration, its acknowledgement of violence against women and girls as “an obstacle to the achievement of equality, development and peace” and the work of the Special Rapporteur, has been divided and sluggish to put its words into practice. In 2003, the failure to act was highlighted at the meetings of the 47th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women which, for the first time in the history of the Commission, proved unable to arrive at a set of agreed conclusions regarding violence against women. In this case, cultural and religiously-based arguments were used in an attempt to circumvent countries' obligations as outlined in the 1993 Declaration. It is imperative, therefore, at future meetings of the Commission that decisive language with regard to the elimination of violence against women and girls be adopted as agreed conclusions, setting out not only the legal but moral tone befitting of this global epidemic.

In order to deliver on its many commitments, the international community needs to dramatically increase the power, authority, and resources dedicated to women's human rights, gender equality, and women's empowerment. The Bahá'í International Community is part of discussions that suggest creating an autonomous United Nations agency with a comprehensive mandate dedicated to the full range of women's rights and concerns. These derive from the Beijing Platform for Action, the Cairo Programme of Work, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and ensure that the human rights perspective is fully integrated into all aspects of UN work. To guarantee a voice for women at the highest levels of decision making at the UN, such an agency should be led by a director with the status of Under Secretary-General. To effectively carry out its mandate, the institution requires a sufficient national presence as well as independent women's rights experts as part of its governing body.

Efforts to eradicate the epidemic of violence against women and girls must proceed from and be reinforced by every level of society, from the individual to the international community. However, they must not be limited to legal and institutional reforms, for these address only the manifest crime and are incapable of generating the deep-rooted changes needed to create a culture where justice and equality prevail over the impetuosity of authoritarian power and physical force. Indeed the inner and outer dimensions of human life are reciprocal, one cannot be reformed without the other. It is this inner, ethical, and moral dimension which now stands in need of transformation and, ultimately, provides the surest foundation for values and behavior which raise up women and girls and, in turn, promotes the advancement of all of humankind.

Towards the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 57th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—15 November 2012

The epidemic of violence and discrimination against women and girls is once again on the global agenda. The efforts of governments, civil society organizations, and individuals at the local, national, and international levels have led to the development of legal and institutional frameworks to protect the rights of women and girls and have called attention to the culture of impunity within which violence against women is often tolerated and even condoned.

Women and girls in territories throughout the world are enmeshed in a culture which enables and sustains violence against them. This affects not only women and girls; such violence is ultimately an act of aggression against society as a whole. It degrades victims, perpetrators, families, and entire communities. As such, the eradication of violence requires not only changes in law and policy, but more fundamental changes at the level of culture, attitudes, and beliefs. Such changes must be grounded in the conviction that the equality of women and men is not only a goal to be achieved, but a truth about human nature to be acknowledged and embraced. The soul has no gender. The very essence of what makes us human is neither “male” nor “female.” Conceived in this way, equality goes beyond a tally of resources or a set of social norms. It reflects the nobility inherent in every human being.

Viewed in the broader context, violence and discrimination against women and girls is one of the symptoms of a social order characterized by conflict, injustice, and insecurity. Its structures and processes—constrained by particularistic agendas—prove themselves incapable of serving the common good. As we seek to eradicate violence against women and girls, we must not lose sight of the broader, long-term goal: namely the creation of conditions in which women and men can work shoulder to shoulder in constructing a more just and equitable social order.

We offer the following recommendations for consideration by the Commission:

Prevailing conceptions of power and empowerment need to be redefined. The 2006 ‘In-depth study on all forms of violence against women’ stated that “structural imbalances of power and inequality between women and men are both the context and causes of violence against women” (A/61/122/Add.1). Yet an improved balance of power will not suffice. The very conception of power needs to be seriously questioned and fundamentally redefined. Prevailing notions of power tend to focus on the ability to compete effectively, to dominate, and to gain ascendancy over others. These essentially adversarial expressions of power do not provide society with the tools needed to create institutions and processes that foster the progress of all members of the community. The dominant thinking of power as ‘power over’ must be replaced with the concept of ‘power to’—power as a capacity of the individual or of the collective. We need a broadened appreciation of the sources of power available to humanity, such as power that comes from the bonds of solidarity and



BIC Principal US Representative Carl Murrell joins a side event at the 2025 UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York

mutual concern, and power that emanates from unity of thought and action, and the promotion of such qualities as justice, honesty, and integrity.

The Commission has repeatedly noted that the empowerment of women and girls is key to protecting their human rights and breaking the cycle of violence. Empowerment is a process of recognition, capacity building, and action. Individuals become empowered as they come to recognize their inherent worth, the fundamental equality of all human beings, and their ability to improve their own condition and that of the wider society. At the collective level, empowerment involves the transformation of relationships of dominance into relationships of equality and mutuality.

“ *At home, men must come to understand their role in modeling healthy relations and respect for male and female members of the family.* ”

The role of men in addressing this violence and exploitation has been recognized as a key aspect of prevention. Men and boys must be encouraged to speak out strongly against violence and exploitation and not to protect perpetrators. They must make a conscious effort to understand fully the principle of the equality of women and men and its expression in both private and public life. At home, men must come to understand their role in modeling healthy relations and respect for male and female members of the family. It is often in the home that boys and girls first learn about the nature of power and how it is expressed. Distorted expressions of power and authority promote in children attitudes and habits that are carried to the workplace, to the community, and to public life.



Participants from diverse backgrounds take part in a Bahá'í gathering

The international community and the State must shift from reactive approaches to ones that focus on prevention of violence. Prevention must begin by identifying and addressing the underlying causes of the violence rather than its symptoms. Efforts aimed at prevention must consider the prevailing conceptions of gender identity and of power, and the forms of discrimination and disadvantage that place women and girls at risk of violence. While States have initiated various prevention programs, these have been hampered by an overall lack of societal transformation. Such transformation involves changes at the level of attitudes, culture, community life, as well as in the structures that sustain and normalize violence and exploitation. To date, the majority of prevention activity has been carried out by civil society organizations, with limited resources. States need to assume greater responsibility for the implementation of policies and programs that such transformation requires and support the initiatives of civil society. In addition, more research is needed to determine strategies to prevent violence against girls and women in States that are fragile or in the midst of conflict or post-conflict recovery.

One approach towards social transformation is through the education and training of children and youth in a manner that cultivates in them a sense of dignity as well as responsibility for the well-being of their family members and for the wider community. Drawing on the experiences of the worldwide Bahá'í community in promoting social transformation, we note a number of elements in educational endeavors that support such transformation: a conviction that happiness and honor lie in integrity; the ability to act with moral courage; the ability to participate in non-adversarial decision making; a degree of excellence in a productive skill through which one can meet one's needs with dignity; the ability to analyze social conditions and understand the forces that shape them; the ability to express ideas eloquently and wisely; the capacity to foster collaboration; and an emphasis on service to the community. While emphasis must continue to be placed on girls' access to quality education, due attention must be given to the education of boys particularly with respect to issues of gender equality.

No custom, tradition, or religious interpretation that sanctions any form of violence against women and girls should be allowed to outweigh the obligation to eradicate violence against women and girls. The regrettable practice of hiding behind cultural and religious traditions that permit violence against women perpetuates a climate of legal and moral impunity. The responsibility of States to protect women and girls from violence must take precedence over any such customs. Religious leaders, who play an instrumental role in shaping attitudes and beliefs, must also support unequivocally the principle of the equality of women and men. Practices and doctrines which condone or promote violence against women and girls need to be eliminated. It must also be remembered that all religions contain the voices of women. Too often, due to ignorance, lack of education or lack of opportunity to be heard, the views of women have been absent from the definition of what religion is and how its teachings bear on public and private life.

States must take comprehensive measures to eradicate the culture of impunity. The individual, her family, and her community are under the protection of the State. Yet, a culture of impunity persists in many territories: perpetrators of violence against and exploitation of women and girls go unpunished (or inadequately punished). The victims of such acts have little or no means of redress and or access to support services. More needs to be done to prevent the violence and exploitation of women and girls. All too often, for example, inadequate resources are allocated to implement laws that protect women and specialized services for victims do not exist. In many cases of violence and abuse, the web of actors is extensive and the pressures to remain silent about the abuse are strong. Penalties for perpetrators must be accompanied by measures to ensure the security of victims, who often need protection from retribution. The incorporation of commitments made in Security Council resolutions related to women, peace and security, into national action plans has been a positive step in this regard.

Perspective | Building communities free of gender-based violence: The constructive role of religion

By Bani Dugal

New York—10 September 2021



The work of eradicating gender-based violence, carried forward by UN Women, the Gender-Based Violence Action Coalition, and many others, proceeds on fronts ranging from strengthening legal frameworks, to expanding support services, to resourcing and recognizing women's rights organizations. At the heart of such efforts is the construction of local communities that are strong, resilient, just, and free from gender-based violence. And key to this process of community building are faith communities, and the role to be played by religion itself, understood as a system of knowledge, meaning, value, and action.

It must be acknowledged that those acting in the name of religion have all too often exacerbated gender-based violence instead of alleviating it. This is a painful fact that requires an unequivocal response: no custom, tradition, or religious interpretation ever outweighs the obligation—both legal and moral—to eradicate violence against women and girls.

At the same time, to build communities increasingly free from violence is to engage those foundational issues—who we are, what our purpose is in life, how we relate to one another—that have always been the province of religion. The equality of women and men is not merely a tally of comparable resources or a set of social norms. Rather, it is a truth about human nature, reflecting the nobility latent in every human being. The spark of the Divine, recognized by so many religious systems as being present within each of us, affirms the inherent equality of the sexes and demands its full realization in the social systems around us.

What does it look like for a religious community to work toward a gender-equal world free from violence? Central to the efforts of my own religious tradition, the Bahá'í Faith—which makes no claim to perfection—is a process of spiritual education and social empowerment centered on assisting growing numbers of individuals to apply spiritual teachings to daily life and to the challenges facing society.

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namely the creation of conditions in which women and men
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and equitable social order.* ”



In Germany, youth explore online interaction through film, gaining creative skills while reflecting on technology's role in fostering human well-being

The equality of women and men is explicit in the approach and curricula of this process, the central objective of which is building capacity for lasting social change. Many women who enter its educational programs as participants gain the confidence and skills necessary to begin leading activities themselves. Some go on to coordinate the efforts of others, men and women alike. As they become increasingly valued resources recognized in the local community, women's conceptions of themselves and their potential contribution to society can expand significantly.

But while capacity being built in growing numbers of women is central to a vibrant and resilient community, equally important is the transformation and active support of men and boys. In every culture, deeply rooted assumptions and prejudices about gender distort the development of both men and women, and foster environments in which gender-based violence can thrive. Assisting men and boys in areas of human expression in which they have been historically underdeveloped is therefore an essential component of a lasting resolution to patterns of aggression and dominance.

The educational process described here directly confronts the habits of patriarchy. Seeing women serving in positions of increasing responsibility, visibility, and decision making in the local community, for example, has challenged many men's assumptions about gender roles. But the paradigm is not one of opposition alone.

Those men who are taking part in the process engage the concept of gender equality as a fundamental truth of human reality, grounded in their own advancing understanding of the Divine Will. Coming to recognize that movement toward a more gender equal world is to everyone's benefit, including their own, they are assisted to infuse this principle in their personal relationships and to take steps to apply it to the patterns of society around them.

And as growing numbers of both sexes commit themselves to processes of community transformation, experience from over 180 countries demonstrates that deeper collective consultation on shared values and priorities becomes possible and long-standing norms around gender dynamics become susceptible to change.

What I hope to have done in sharing the experience of the Bahá'í Faith is to demonstrate the vital role that people and communities of faith can play in bringing the noble teachings and ideals of religion to bear on grave social challenges such as gender-based violence.

As we seek to eradicate violence against women and girls, we must not lose sight of the broader, long-term goal: namely the creation of conditions in which women and men can work shoulder to shoulder in constructing a more just and equitable social order. Let us draw on the contributions of all who long to contribute toward such a necessary goal.

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This piece is a personal reflection of Bani Dugal who is the Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

WOMEN AND ARMED CONFLICT

UNIVERSAL EDUCATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR GLOBAL PROSPERITY

The Bahá'í teachings envision a future characterized by peace, safety, and security—where every individual or group is treated with equal dignity and respect, where the well-being of all is seen as a shared responsibility. Yet the alarming incidence of conflict motivated by bigotry, fear, or greed reveal a troubling belief among perpetrators of violence that some lives are more valuable than others. The effects are detrimental to all. Women, severely affected by the horrors of war, are disproportionately impacted by displacement, loss, violence, and abuse. Women are also more likely to be excluded from spaces designed to address these violations, despite evidence that their participation leads to more sustainable and lasting peace.

Needed are new forms of leadership that embrace humanity's interconnectedness, promote the advancement of women, and confront underlying causes such as prejudice and self-interest. On the international stage, the Bahá'í International Community is actively working to advance processes related to the promotion of peace, including exploring the intersection between the gender and peace and security discourses.

At the grassroots level, Bahá'í communities are learning how the promotion of gender equality through educational programs and community-building activities that foster cohesion is a significant driver for peace. In some areas, they have directly collaborated with local leaders to ensure women's engagement in reconciliation efforts where conflict persists.

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The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is one of the most important, though less acknowledged prerequisites of peace. The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations. There are no grounds, moral, practical, or biological, upon which such denial can be justified. Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge.

— The Universal House of Justice, world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith

The Impact of Racism on Women

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 45th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—8 March 2001

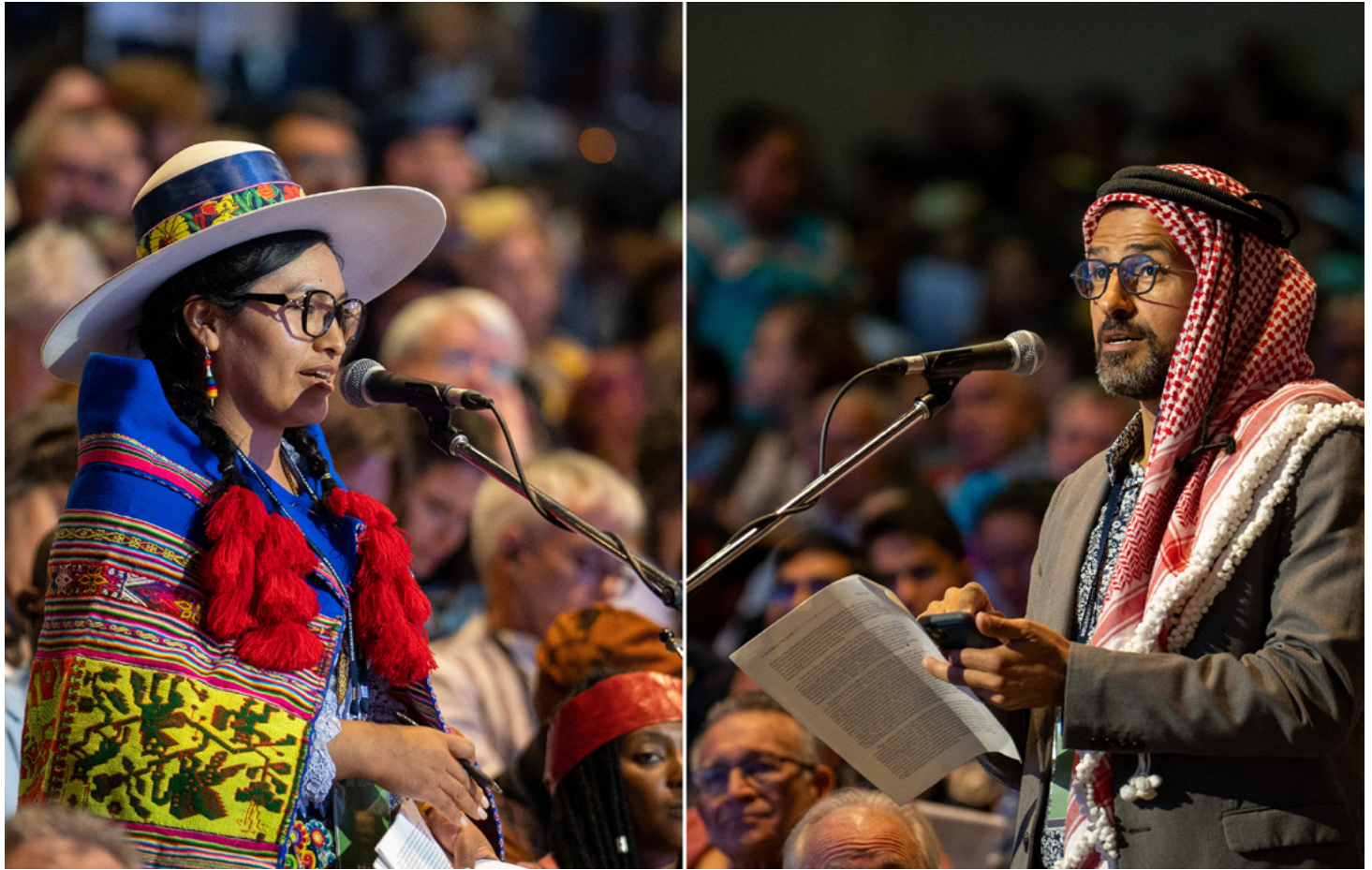
The Bahá'í International Community is pleased that the Commission on the Status of Women is focusing global attention on the impact of racism on women at its 45th session. Bahá'ís the world over—regardless of gender or ethnicity—have longed for and promoted both the advancement of women and the elimination of all forms of prejudice, including those based on race, ethnicity, and gender.

A world that promotes the equality of women and men will lift much of the burden from women. Likewise a world free of racism will further lighten women's load. But the benefits extend even further. While women are the ones primarily affected when race and gender inequalities coincide, the human race as a whole is disadvantaged and its progress retarded by these injustices. As the Bahá'í writings state, “As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.”

Women throughout the world find themselves greatly disadvantaged in a socially stratified world by the compounding of discrimination based on race, gender, class, and age. Within what has been termed a “matrix of domination,” or “a range of interlocking inequalities” that defines gender, women belonging to an oppressed group feel the effects of these disadvantages most keenly, as they belong simultaneously to two groups that are discriminated against. Racism creates basic social divisions and power structures, and the inequality promoted by racial divisions is reinforced by structures that also limit opportunities for women. Because of this double jeopardy, women belonging to minority races or ethnic groups often live in virtual invisibility. Neglecting their history and using the media to reinforce gender stereotypes exacerbates the problem.

“*Bahá'ís the world over—regardless of gender or ethnicity—have longed for and promoted both the advancement of women and the elimination of all forms of prejudice, including those based on race, ethnicity, and gender.*”

The disadvantages and injustices suffered by women of oppressed groups living in societies where resources are limited have been highlighted over the past two decades in international fora such as the United Nations. These women endure discrimination in education, particularly where tradition decrees that girl children are not “worth” educating. Their health is jeopardized through poor nutrition, poor reproductive health care, and ineffective protection from unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases—all a result of their social status. The brutal practice of female genital



Bahá'í delegates from around the world gather to consult on community building and social action

mutilation causes pain and suffering and endangers women's health in the name of “cultural practice,” and if the procedure renders them infertile, they are stigmatized as of little value in societies that measure women's worth largely by their ability to produce children. The perilous situation of women in the midst of armed conflict, who are subjected to violence, the trafficking in women and girls for the purposes of prostitution, the exploitation of women laborers—all of these have been documented and examined at length.

Women positioned at the intersection of race and gender are most glaringly affected by the social structures that sustain discrimination and exploitation, but these injustices affect everyone. For example, disadvantages experienced by women oppressed because of race produce unacknowledged benefits for women and men belonging to favored groups. The reluctance to acknowledge these privileges perpetuates injustice and hinders society from developing in healthy ways. When women everywhere, in every culture and society, are welcomed as full partners with men in all fields of endeavor, conditions that promote real justice and peace will prevail.



Bahá'í delegates from around the world gather to consult on community building and social action

Since the founding of the United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community has spoken many times in international fora about the baneful effects of discrimination, especially racism, and about the need for women's equality. The Bahá'í community is dedicated in principle and practice to the abolition of racism and the promotion of the equality of women and men at all levels.

Within the family, Bahá'ís seek to teach their children the values of oneness, equality, and justice. Bahá'ís value interracial marriage for its positive effect on society and educate their daughters in the same curricula as their sons. If the family is not able to provide for the education of both, parents are encouraged to give preference to the girls, as they will be the first educators of the next generation.

In local communities, Bahá'í institutions are charged with promoting both the equality of women and men and the abolition of racial prejudice. If Bahá'í parents are remiss in providing for the education of their daughters, the local Bahá'í community must arrange for it. Women are fully eligible to elect and to serve on local and national governing councils. In Bahá'í elections, if the vote results in a tie between two people, one of who is a member

of a minority group, that person is automatically considered as elected. In Bahá'í communities both women and men learn the art of "consultation," or the frank and courteous exchange of views. Social and economic development projects have established schools specifically for girls and training institutes for women that not only teach literacy and practical skills by which they can earn a livelihood but also strengthen moral values and spiritual capacities to assist them to contribute to the advancement of society. Village health care programs promote the well-being of women and children in remote areas of the world thereby benefiting the whole society.

In international fora, the Bahá'í International Community has long encouraged a fundamental change in beliefs and attitudes about race through education and the promotion of the concept of world citizenship. It has also worked in these fora to advance the status of women.

Bahá'ís believe that civilization is ever advancing, and the achievement of unity at all levels and in all aspects of life is of paramount importance at this stage in human development. As Bahá'u'lláh has written, "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."

Bahá'ís do not regard themselves as experts in this endeavor, but if their more than one hundred and fifty years of experience can be of service to others pursuing this goal, they are happy to offer it for study. It is clear that only when "the injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all," will the human race have addressed the challenges inherent in social structures based on domination, in which injustice is accepted as the natural order of things.

In Full Partnership: Women's Advancement as a Prerequisite for Peaceful Societies

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 69th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—20 February 2025

The end of the twentieth century was momentous in humanity's collective history. After centuries of effort, women's rights were recognized as human rights. Significant strides were also made to translate political agreement into laws and practices. Together, these advances culminated in the landmark Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing—an occasion we honor thirty years on.



Opening session of the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, 1995 (UN Photo/Milton Grant)



Inauguration Ceremony of the World Conference of the International Women's Year, Mexico City, Mexico, 1975 (UN Photo/B. Lane)

Notably, the Conference signaled widespread commitment to the foundational principle of gender equality, drawing some 50,000 delegates from governments, United Nations agencies, and civil society. Representatives of the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) collaborated alongside these actors at that seminal moment—as they had at the preceding conferences in Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi. BIC representatives have since witnessed the international landscape of women's advancement evolve, and continue to work closely with those actively pursuing the Conference's desired outcomes.

The advancement of women is a prerequisite for peaceful and prosperous societies. It is an objective that must be embraced if we are to bring about a harmonious future that goes beyond the cessation of violence. Yet, the 12 critical areas of concern articulated in Beijing, devised to support women's full development and equality with men, are still to be adequately addressed. Hard-won gains are eroding as patriarchal norms embedded in the systems and structures of societies resurge with harmful effects for women and men alike. Indeed, history has demonstrated that institutional reforms remain tenuous and vulnerable to shifts in power and priorities if they are not accompanied by a more enduring transformation within individual mindsets and social norms.

This anniversary, then, provides an opportunity to derive insights from communities learning to cultivate healthier and more inclusive dynamics, beginning within the home—where many societal beliefs and attitudes often originate—extending into neighborhoods and villages, and eventually leading to the emergence of just systems and practices. The



A montage of Bahá'í activities in Bihar, India, highlights the vital contributions of women in community-building and social transformation

knowledge generated by these experiences offer valuable lessons, which will also need to be applied at the international level. For, ultimately, the realization of gender equality requires universal participation. It necessitates the proactive involvement of every segment of every population, working shoulder to shoulder, in full partnership.

Gender equality is not only a goal which humanity aspires to achieve, but a necessary condition for peace and prosperity. Societies with higher levels of equality between the sexes tend to have lower levels of violent conflict. Likewise, it is widely accepted that peace processes that engage more women tend to last longer.

Failure to recognize that women are equal to men ultimately impedes the material, social, and spiritual flourishing of every individual. Yet, women, who are more likely to experience abuse, bias, and discrimination, are also more likely to be excluded from spaces designed to address these violations. If humanity is to fully understand and overcome the systemic nature of these challenges, the rich diversity of human experience must be drawn upon in its entirety. Barriers that prevent women from contributing knowledge to the search for effective solutions must therefore be removed.

Diverse perspectives must be reflected in decision-making spaces, but care must be given to guard against tokenistic representation. Prejudicial attitudes can be held by women and men alike; normative change is therefore necessary. Patriarchal tendencies and self-serving ambition will need to be replaced with qualities like collaboration, reciprocity, compassion, and a humble posture of learning in all settings. Until transformation takes root within mindsets and finds expression in culture, the underlying causes of prejudice and discrimination, embedded in the systems and structures of societies, will remain unquestioned and will continue to perpetuate injustice.

What might it look like in practice for populations to commit to the principle of gender equality as a foundation for peaceful societies? Bahá'í communities, for their part, are working to address long-standing beliefs and practices that run counter to the principle of equality. In areas where their efforts have become more systematic, these communities are observing dramatic and profound shifts in the way women are viewed in their societies. These changing perceptions are leading to greater degrees of inclusivity and equity, allowing more opportunities for women to serve in leadership roles and contribute to social change.

Of course these communities still grapple with age-old systems and customs that have historically maintained an unjust status quo. But what is distinctive about their experience is the approach to social transformation: the means for constructive social change must be coherent with its ends. This approach has involved a range of educational initiatives designed



A Bahá'í prayer gathering in India brings together community members in a spirit of unity, reflection and shared purpose

to develop capacity within individuals to learn—with their family members, neighbors, friends, and co-workers—to apply moral and spiritual qualities such as unity, justice, equality, and trustworthiness in their personal lives and social settings. This educational process, offered throughout the individual's life cycle, is guided and reinforced by a global system of coordination, and is implemented by local populations according to their specific circumstances and resources.

In the state of Bihar, India, for instance, these educational programs led groups to reflect on the spiritual principle that every individual is inherently noble, irrespective of sex. As they continued to engage in these programs, it became increasingly difficult to overlook social practices that contradicted this principle. Participants—both women and men—began to identify harmful trends within their villages, and considered how to respond to the fact that women were held back in many areas such as advancing in their education and contributing to decision making.

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The advancement of women is a prerequisite for peaceful and prosperous societies. It is an objective that must be embraced if we are to bring about a harmonious future that goes beyond the cessation of violence.

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The Bahá'í community decided to convene consultative spaces for families to explore the underlying causes of such challenges and to devise potential pathways forward. Participants shared experiences, and through courageous deliberation, explored the uncomfortable truth that girls and women were not viewed as inherently equal within their societies, and thus did not share the same opportunities as boys and men.

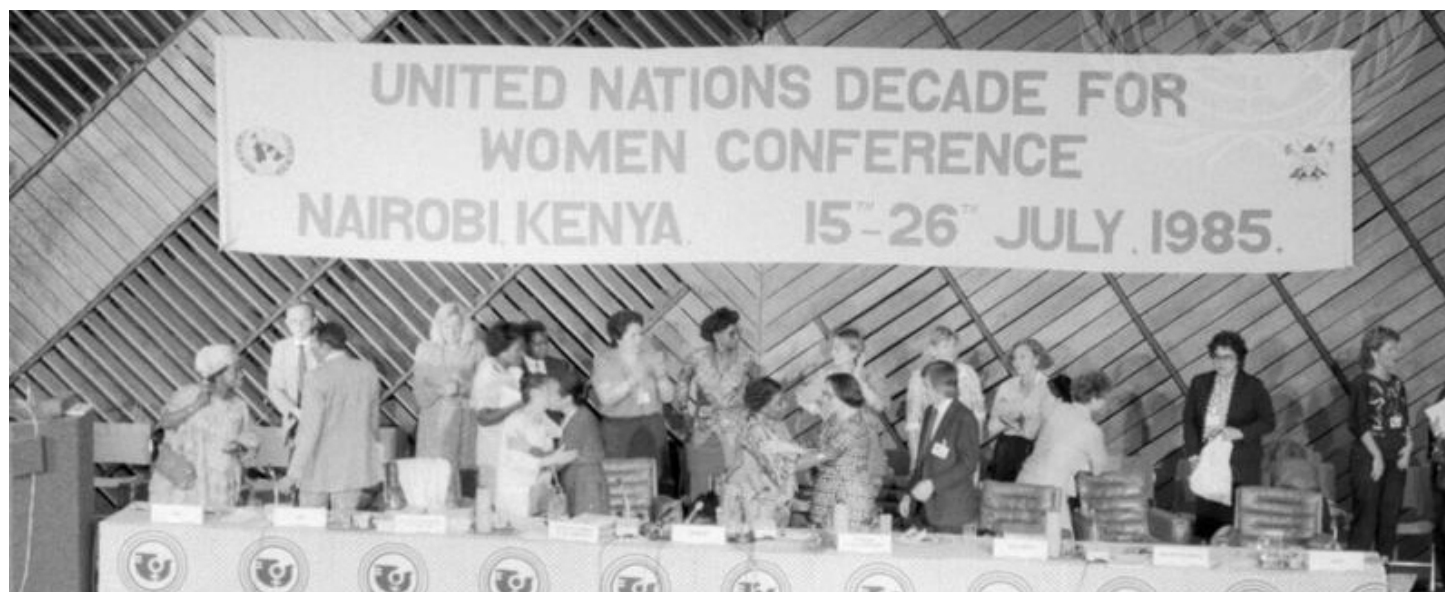
It became clear that this unjust reality was reinforced by numerous expectations, assumptions, and fears—for example, that the destiny of a daughter was to be married off, that women were considered “unclean” during menstruation, or that it was unsafe for girls to travel far distances to school. These attitudes found expression in many harmful ways. Boys were often prioritized when deciding which child to send to school, financial resources were directed toward a dowry

“ ***Grassroots initiatives provide a vital source of insight into the lived experiences of communities learning to effect social transformation.*** ”

rather than a daughter’s professional development, and women who were viewed as “unclean” were not permitted to enter certain settings, thus preventing their participation in decision-making spaces or leadership roles.

The enhanced capacity to analyze the manifestations of inequality was an important driver for cultural transformation within the community. Many boys and men began to openly interrogate long-held beliefs and examine the ways their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters were impacted. It became clear that this was not just a challenge for women alone; the whole community was impacted and this demanded universal action.

Participants have since been working collectively to remove the obstacles they identified. Together, they have been creating new educational opportunities that emphasize the moral and intellectual development of every child, and have been laboring to improve the safety of their villages. They have been reflecting on how individuals’ mindsets can continue to align with the principle of gender equality and, in doing so, have been contributing to the evolution of a new culture. Many participants have commented on how these consultative spaces, combined with the community’s educational efforts described above, have contributed to a rise in mutual respect between women and men in their



Delegates attend the 1985 Conference on the United Nations Women's Decade in Nairobi, Kenya, advancing global efforts toward gender equality (UN Photo/Milton Grant)



Delegates gather in Copenhagen, Denmark, for the 1980 UN Decade for Women World Conference (UN Photo/Per Jacobsen)

villages. Many have perceived a greater sense of trust, common cause, understanding, and ultimately unity—within the home and extending into the community. All these are indicators of movement toward greater levels of peace.

Grassroots initiatives provide a vital source of insight into the lived experiences of communities learning to effect social transformation. The UN is well-suited—through the mandate of and networks available to UN Women, among others—to distill, analyze, and share experiences that promote women’s advancement at the local, regional, and national levels, and to identify methodologies that can be implemented by national governments. The UN’s role will continue to be critical in raising awareness of, and advocating for, the principle of gender equality as a fundamental prerequisite for peace on the international stage, as well as in shaping relevant international policy frameworks. The UN is also uniquely positioned to model, within its own internal structures and operations, a culture that dismantles patriarchal norms and centers approaches that are inclusive and collaborative.

A future where women can meaningfully engage as equal protagonists in all fields of human endeavor—and where every individual, irrespective of sex, is able to flourish as a co-creator of society—is the destination toward which humanity must now advance. Far more than simply an aspiration, the principle of gender equality needs to now be embraced by growing populations, young and old alike in every country around the globe, if we are to usher in a future of lasting peace and prosperity.

WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

CREATING JUST ECONOMIC ARRANGEMENTS

The Bahá'í holy writings affirm that all human beings have been created “to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.” Yet for many women and girls, the opportunity to contribute to the material and economic progress of their societies is hindered by countless barriers, including biases that have come to be deeply embedded in societal structures. Many women are also financially impacted by outdated economic and development frameworks that prioritize profit over human well-being and encourage endless material accumulation and competitive self-interest.

Despite this reality, many women are offering vital knowledge essential to advancing collective prosperity through their engagement in Bahá'í community life. From Nepal to the United States, Papua New Guinea to Honduras, they are actively pioneering just economic approaches that center on trustworthiness, integrity, and generosity.

Through apprenticeship programs, income-generating projects, and microfinancing ventures, Bahá'ís are learning to create employment opportunities and to build local capacity to support community needs. Through ethical business practices, they are aiming to prioritize sustainability in workplaces and supply chains. And through community banks, they are learning to extend access to financial resources and markets and are exploring how to promote local development through contributions made to social and economic development funds.



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Woman must especially devote her energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences.... By this means she will demonstrate capability and ensure recognition of equality in the social and economic equation.

— Bahá'í holy writings

Beyond Mere Economics: A Moral Inquiry into the Roots of Empowerment

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 62nd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—12 March 2018

Young women from tribal villages in the hill country of Thailand participate in a program that, in addition to furthering their own development, helps them to better accompany the rising generations in improving some aspect of their local community's conditions. Motivated by the contribution they are making, many choose to take jobs in their home villages during holiday breaks, rather than seeking higher-paid employment in more distant cities, so that they can continue supporting the development of their communities.

Women in rural villages in the Central African Republic are assisted to establish informal classes for the moral and spiritual education of young people in their immediate vicinity. As they gain experience and confidence, they begin mentoring other teachers who are newer to the process. In time, they convene gatherings to consult with community members about their aspirations for the village's youngest members, and together establish a community-supported school. At one or other point in this process these women might begin receiving material assistance in support of their efforts. At every point they gain capacity, build confidence, and impact their community.

The development of capacity must concern itself with all aspects of human existence—economic as well as social, intellectual, cultural, spiritual, and moral.

In vignettes such as these can be found a conception of empowerment that includes, yet transcends, increased economic activity. Women and girls cannot, of course, make their full contribution to society when barred from owning the land they work, or when social norms make them dependent on male relatives to participate in the economy. But the path from doubt to self confidence, from silence to voice, from passivity to action, cannot be understood only in terms of entering the labor market or integrating into a global production chain of one kind or another. The development of capacity must concern itself with all aspects of human existence—economic as well as social, intellectual, cultural, spiritual, and moral.

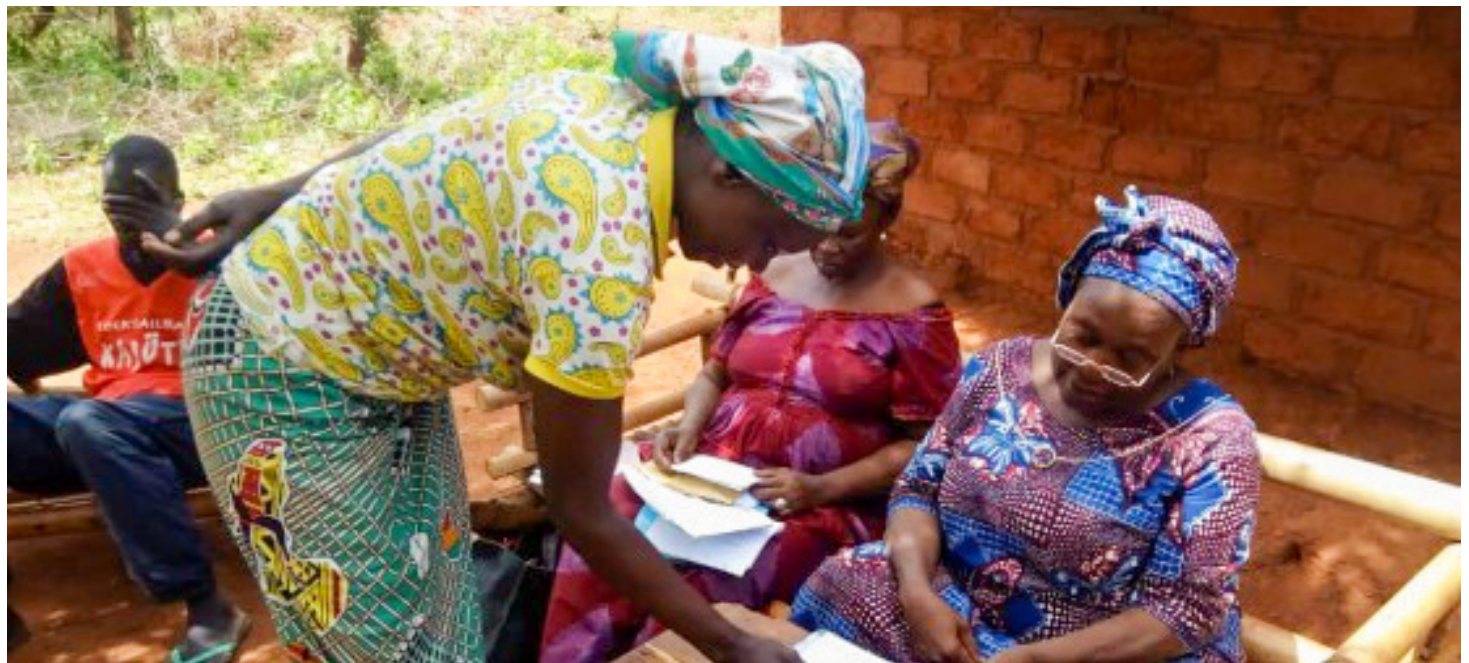
At the root of countless barriers to women and girls assuming their rightful place in society is a refusal to embrace the reality that women and men are equal, and that all human beings are one. When left unexposed to the light of justice and reason, distorted conceptions of reality manifest themselves in patterns of superiority, jealousy, mistrust, and fear.

Under such conditions, women and girls are systematically disadvantaged in relation to their male counterparts. Their advancement is then viewed as threatening or demeaning. Their contributions can be overlooked and their perspectives discounted. Notably, this worldview in which advantage for some is understood to come at the expense of others affects many other human relationships, including between young and old, native and immigrant, and majority and minority. When the oneness of humankind is rejected, fault lines of exclusion and marginalization seem to appear at every turn.

It need not be so. Evidence of the universality of those qualities that characterize humanity at its noblest—integrity and compassion, excellence and humility, justice and generosity—is abundant for those who wish to find it. There are many examples around the world of instances in which women and men are working shoulder to shoulder as mutually respected partners. One issue before the Commission on the Status of Women, then, is replication of what is working. How can a culture in which women and men jointly and joyfully contribute to the common good be built in society after society? What is possible to achieve in local communities—not just in a few pilot programs or for the duration of a funding cycle—but indefinitely into the future and all around the world?

“ *Educational systems as a whole should be concerned with building the capacity within a population to trace its own path of development and contribute to the common good.* ”

Such questions are of critical concern to those working for the empowerment of women. For its part, the worldwide Bahá’í community has been striving to learn about the role that knowledge plays—including its generation, diffusion,



In the Central African Republic, members of an elected local Bahá’í institution and emergency volunteers coordinate relief packages for distribution to village residents

and application—in the advancement of society. Decades of experience have shown that when growing numbers of women and men, young and old, of all economic and educational backgrounds, work together to learn about patterns of relationship and corresponding social structures that reflect the fundamental oneness of the human family, real change is possible. The creation of spaces and mechanisms for consultation that draws on the experience of many and values the knowledge that each has to offer at any given point opens pathways for universal participation, and is indispensable to processes of enduring social change.



Bahá'í representatives from Addis Ababa and Brussels join a 2025 UN conference in Rome to support EU–Africa food systems discussions

Educational systems as a whole should be concerned with building the capacity within a population to trace its own path of development and contribute to the common good. Our experience has shown that real transformation can occur when those sustaining such efforts at the grassroots strive to create an environment in which growing numbers of their friends, family members, neighbors, and acquaintances come to see themselves as active agents of their own development and protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge toward individual and collective progress.

Crucially, the central organizing principle of this educational process is the development of capabilities for service to the community and society. Assisted to undertake increasingly complex acts of service, participants gradually gain the vision, confidence, and skills necessary to begin offering activities and programs to others with less experience than themselves. In this way, a good portion of those who enter the process simply as participants go on to shoulder increasing responsibility for its perpetuation and expansion.

Understanding one's role in society in relation to the progress and development of others has proven to be a powerful source of motivation. For women in rural areas, it has often fueled a growing sense of being a capable and empowered contributor to the common good. Just as importantly, seeing women taking on roles of increasing responsibility,

visibility, and decision making has assisted—and not infrequently challenged—men and the community as a whole to rethink inherited assumptions about social patterns and the roles played by women and men.

Also notable in the experience of many Bahá'í communities has been the transformative impact on the rising generations who are engaging in service-oriented efforts. Young people tend to be more flexible in their perceptions of what society could and should be, and frequently, it has been among this population that oppressive cultural assumptions about gender roles have first become susceptible to change. Similarly, the power of moral example that young people can bring to bear, the influence they can exert on mature members of their community through selfless and sustained acts of service, should not be underestimated. Take, for instance, a group of middle-schoolers in Vanuatu who created a small marine reserve that was so successful in reinvigorating a section of nearby coral reef that not only the adults of their village but two other villages replicated their efforts. Similarly, a youth group in Uganda convened a series of community discussions on the importance of educating the girl child, and subsequently saw the village send its first young woman to college. Examples abound of morally empowered young people exerting an influence that can inspire a whole community to arise in action.

* * *

... the power of moral example that young people can bring to bear, the influence they can exert on mature members of their community through selfless and sustained acts of service, should not be underestimated.

These examples are intended to highlight certain elements that seem to be central to the empowerment of rural women and girls. Among them are:

- a means for delivering high-quality education at the village level, driven by the community itself
- a focus on both the material and spiritual aspects of individual and collective life
- an approach which quickly translates study into acts of service
- consultative spaces to identify and explore cultural values and assumptions

Member States provide for the well-being of their citizens through a variety of means, such as just laws, equitable service provision, promotion of artistic and cultural expression, and others. In all these areas, they have powerful means to provide for the advancement of women and girls. We hope that the above considerations will be helpful in implementing the gender goals and targets of Agenda 2030 and in pursuing the equality of women and men more broadly.

Creating the World Anew: Leaving No One Behind

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 63rd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—8 March 2019

At one level, social protection may be conceived of as the set of policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability. A theme as weighty as providing social protection to all, particularly the most vulnerable—the majority of whom are women and children—must be considered in the light of a greater truth: that all of humanity is one, and all of humanity must benefit from the plentiful resources of our shared homeland. That all people have the right to lead lives of dignity, with opportunities to receive a quality education, to access healthcare, to practice their spiritual values, and to contribute their share to the well-being of their communities, through work, nurturing healthy families, and offering acts of service, should by now be an accepted truth.

Moreover, a clear implication of the oneness of humanity is that women and men are equal. The growing recognition of both oneness and the equality of women and men is a hallmark of the modern age—and one that augurs well for the gradual emergence of a global civilization characterized by justice, reciprocity, and prosperity. Nevertheless, the full expression of oneness in every facet of life has yet to be realized; indeed, its realization may at times feel out of reach. That women and girls are often the hardest hit by the injustices engendered in the current ordering of society is unsurprising given the historical forces that have given rise to that order. While growing acceptance of the principle of oneness was one of the greatest legacies of the twentieth century, many of the ideological underpinnings of prevalent societal systems are premised on values that are antithetical to oneness. Ideals of exclusion, belief in the inherent superiority of some groups over others, and reliance on adversarialism as a means of achieving progress are coded into the very DNA of the structures of society. What follows, then, is that the principle of oneness cannot be grafted superficially onto these; the systems and structures of society must be remolded to embody oneness.

A critical question before a body as significant as the United Nations and the Member States that comprise it is how to draw on and release the capacities and collective powers of all the world's peoples, including, critically, women and girls. Beyond institutional implications, principles of oneness and equality call for profound changes at the level of culture. No one is free from the exacting demands of justice; all will be called upon to continuously re-examine their own attitudes, values, and relationships with others.

Addressing Economic Inequalities

As a result of social and cultural norms and inequalities, women experience stages of particular vulnerability throughout their life cycles. In many countries, women are much more likely than men to lose their income and fall into poverty. Even in the most economically advanced communities, women's reproductive roles have often meant they will not



United Nations Headquarters, New York, United States

be afforded the same roles and responsibilities in the workforce as their male counterparts. There are many obstacles preventing women and girls from accessing public services and benefiting from strong infrastructure. Governance systems that promote collective security, environmental sustainability, and an equitable and just economic order are required to permanently remove them. Given their centrality to social protection, appropriate economic arrangements deserve special consideration.

Extreme concentrations of wealth have given rise to the distorted perception that the world lacks sufficient resources for all of its inhabitants. When considering how to bring all people out of poverty, there is an understandable temptation to focus on the generation of wealth. Attention to growth and income generation alone has very often translated into more wealth for those who do not need it, and increased deprivation for those who do. Regulatory structures that allow small numbers to amass unconscionable amounts of material resources for themselves and their kin cannot be perpetuated. So long as economic models continue to disregard and externalize moral considerations, such as justice and trustworthiness, global financial instability will continue to rise, and all of humanity will struggle.

Indeed, around the world the consequences of environmental degradation are being felt. Yet economic paradigms in most industrialized countries treat environmental impact as an externality. This has given rise to the impoverishment of rural communities, the exploitation of vulnerable populations, and the rapid deterioration of the natural world. Promising new models are arising that consider questions of economics in light of planetary boundaries. These models should be investigated to determine their potential as well as their limits. Generally, the global community may wish



A shopkeeper in Baganuur, Mongolia, expands her business through a community bank supported by Bahá'í-inspired development efforts

to devote substantial resources towards understanding how economic models organized around principles of collective trusteeship, justice, and reciprocity can emerge and adapt to the needs of different communities.

Releasing the Powers of the Human Spirit

In communities around the world, a lack of material wealth has been an obstacle to attracting, training and retaining qualified teachers, and to erecting and maintaining educational facilities. Agenda 2030 emphasises strengthening public infrastructure as a means of providing education to all. While quality education does depend, to some degree, on a flow of material resources, the experience of many Bahá'í communities at the grassroots suggests that even in the most remote and poverty-stricken areas of the world, there is a wealth of human resources that with time, attention, and the wise channeling of material means, can flourish.

A critical question before a body as significant as the United Nations and the Member States that comprise it is how to draw on and release the capacities and collective powers of all the world's peoples, including, critically, women and girls.

When a community assesses the resources it does possess (for instance, the capacity of local inhabitants to identify challenges and consult upon solutions; the generosity of community members willing to donate time, talent, and materials to construct simple edifices and other provisions) limitations can give way to opportunities. Our experience has shown that initiating an educational process concerned with releasing the full range of human capacities does not need to be delayed until strong infrastructure is in place. A quality education requires attention to the entire educational process—the training of the teachers, the selection or development of appropriate curricula, the creation of an environment that is conducive to learning, and the engagement of the community within which the learning process unfolds. These different dimensions can be supplemented and strengthened by material resources, to a degree. Yet, even more crucial is ensuring that teachers and students be involved in a process of capacity building that releases the powers of the human spirit.

... significant resources must also be channeled toward learning about effective models of governance, education, and economics structured around an entirely new set of principles: that human beings are one, that women and men are equal, that the emergent powers of the collective can be released through cooperation and reciprocity, and that humanity's progress will be greatly bolstered by the full participation of all people in creating the world anew.



A Bahá'í children's class in Nedrini, Panama nurtures spiritual education and a sense of community among young participants

The human spirit—which can be regarded in one sense as the collection of endowments that distinguish human beings from other species, including the human mind—has the capacity to know, to love, and to will. It is a force that has for too long been undervalued, and as such, humanity has been deprived of a limitless source of prosperity. Releasing its powers requires an education that would help children develop the skills and knowledge needed to both transform their characters and lead productive lives. This would include engagement with literature and the arts, scientific training, mastery of technical skills, ability to participate in individual and collective decision-making processes, and developing the capacity to identify needs and consult upon solutions. As their capabilities gradually develop and find expression in the community, there is a burgeoning of those arts, sciences, innovations, philosophies, and ethics upon which civilization depends.

Creating the World Anew

The inability to provide social protection for women and girls at every stage of their lives is only one of the symptoms of an outdated social order. This requires that the current order be pushed to its limits through policy change, through the enactment of just legislation, and through measures to close the gaps of extreme inequalities. However, these changes, though necessary, will prove insufficient in bringing about the new patterns of life that will allow all people to thrive. Given that many of the systems and structures of society were designed precisely to reinforce domination and inequality, significant resources must also be channeled toward learning about effective models of governance, education, and economics structured around an entirely new set of principles: that human beings are one, that women and men are equal, that the emergent powers of the collective can be released through cooperation and reciprocity, and that humanity's progress will be greatly bolstered by the full participation of all people in creating the world anew.

WOMEN IN POWER AND DECISION MAKING

EMBODYING INCLUSIVE CONCEPTIONS OF POWER

Bahá'í communities across the world are learning to redefine conceptions of power, from notions based on competition to ones centered on inclusion. In patriarchal societies, systems are often founded on the assumption that power is finite, resulting in policies and structures that pit individuals against one another in a constant struggle over influence, resources, and prestige.

In this model, women are often systematically excluded from meaningful engagement in decision-making processes, or obliged to adopt aggressive tendencies as qualities traditionally associated with women, such as compassion, collaboration, and humility, are dismissed as weak.

Bahá'ís are challenging the limitations inherent in this traditional paradigm and are exploring new conceptions of power that reflect mutualism and collaboration. Through numerous community-building initiatives, including moral educational programs that cultivate a shared vision of progress, participants from diverse backgrounds come to view each other as co-creators and vital sources of knowledge on the path to collective flourishing. Habits of patriarchy are directly confronted as many men see growing numbers of women actively engaged in decision-making spaces and spearheading positions of increasing responsibility, leadership, and visibility, thereby constructively challenging traditional assumptions about gender roles.



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Again, it is well established in history that where woman has not participated in human affairs the outcomes have never attained a state of completion and perfection. On the other hand, every influential undertaking of the human world wherein woman has been a participant has attained importance.

— Bahá'í holy writings

Developing New Dynamics of Power to Transform the Structures of Society

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 64th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—21 February 2020

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action provides a special opportunity to analyze social structures and power dynamics that are hindering the full expression of gender equality. Undoubtedly, there has been considerable progress in many areas, including the advancement of women's rights in legal and policy frameworks, and in broadening girls' access to education in most countries. Perhaps one of the greatest milestones passed has been in the near-universal acknowledgement that women and men are equal. Nevertheless, while the ideal of equality is generally acknowledged, its expression in all facets of life is far from realized. Indeed, a number of recent setbacks around the world with respect to securing previous gains demonstrate the vulnerability of efforts that employ the adversarial methods of the very structures that impede the advancement of women. A deep examination of the current ordering of society is required in order to identify obstacles hindering equality and opportunities for its flourishing. Ultimately, restructuring society based on ideals of oneness, unity and justice is necessary to fully establish gender equality.

“ *The discourse on gender equality at the United Nations would be strengthened by creating structures that are more inclusive, based on mutual exchange and learning, and that nurture and channel the powers of the human spirit.* ”

When viewed in its broader context, the discrimination against women is one of several symptoms of an ailing social order. Dynamics of domination and opposition have come to define many human relationships, including those between women and men. Efforts to achieve gender equality are frequently framed as battles for power. In its contentious expression, power generates inequality, violence, and exploitation, and cannot easily be oriented to the common or interpersonal good. In a system that is set up like a zero-sum game, it may make sense to fight for access to limited resources and for positions of privilege. Yet, is a zero-sum paradigm the pinnacle of social organization? Can systems and structures be created that allow all people to thrive concurrently? What expressions of power would give rise to such systems and structures?

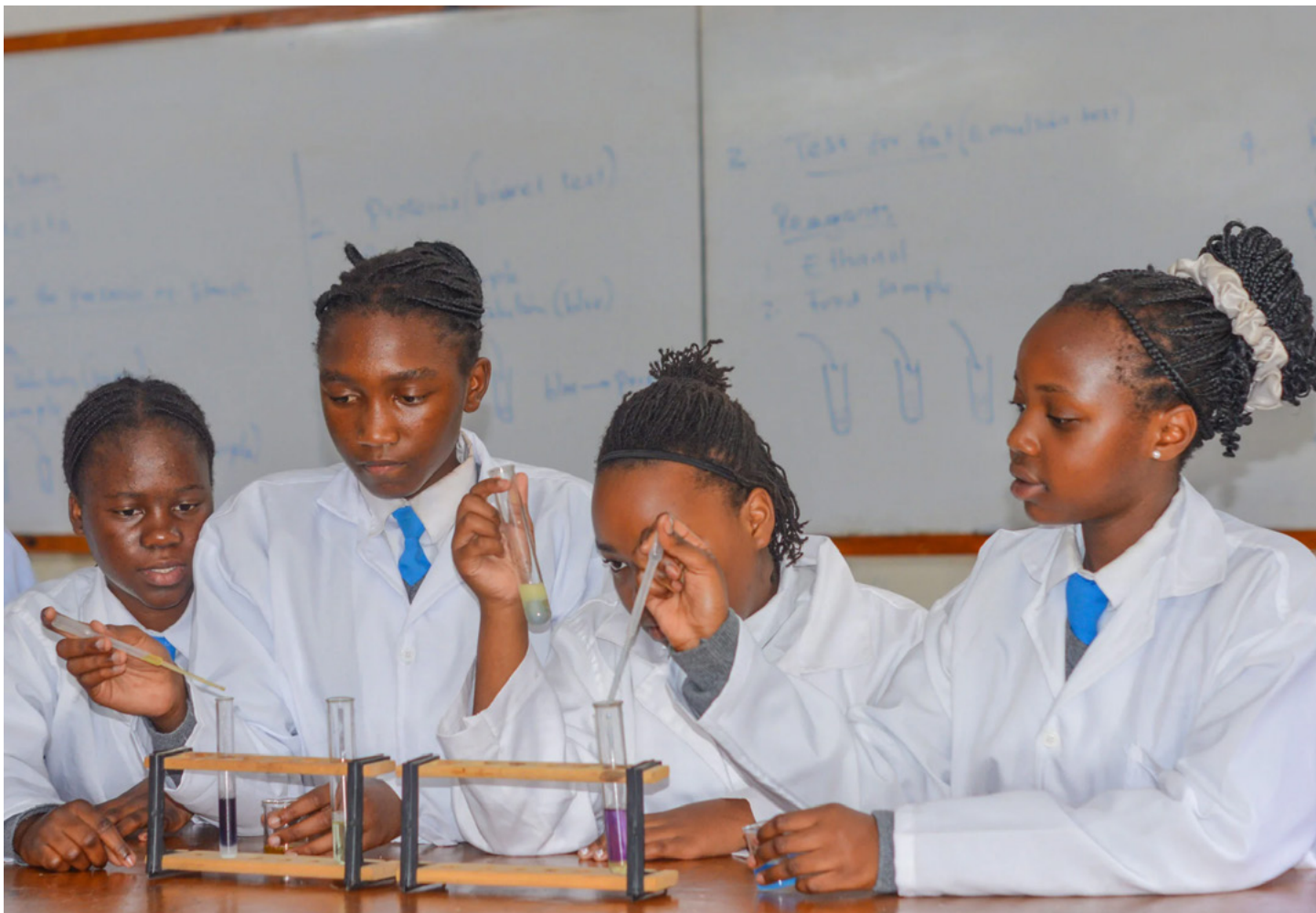
The Bahá'í teachings affirm that all human beings have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization and that each human being has a set of sacred endowments—including consciousness, a heart, and a soul—that allow



Bahá'í delegates from around the world gather to consult on community building and social action

them to do so. The soul has no gender; biases against women have no foundation in spiritual reality. Humanity as a whole has suffered tremendously by being deprived of the participation of women in every arena of civilization. By working together as partners and co-workers, women and men can learn how to draw on constructive expressions of power that will capacitate their efforts to build a fair and equal society. A generative, constructive form of power that involves tapping into the powers of the human spirit and of the collective would enable the reconstruction of social structures for the benefit of all humanity. It would allow for the upliftment of one to contribute to the upliftment of all, and for the well-being of the collective to ensure the well-being of the individual. It is critical that just and cooperative patterns of relationship be established among individuals, groups, and communities, and between individuals and the institutions of society.

Education is one of the essential solutions that will enable the establishment of patterns of relationship that are commensurate with humanity's needs. Some educational models indoctrinate children into the harmful norms and logic of existing systems. Naturally, this is not the kind of education being referred to. The United Nations and Member States should invest in educational processes that give attention to developing both the intellectual and spiritual powers of human beings. These models should promote the oneness of humanity and the equality of women and men. They should assist children to develop a genuine love for all human beings; an orientation to service that will help them address challenges over time with patience and steadfastness; a vision of the future that will motivate them to work towards the transformation of harmful customs and values in their local communities that obstruct progress; and an attitude of humility that will enable them to be open to the perspectives of others and free from rigid attachment to their own views and approaches. They should have numerous opportunities to engage in collective, consultative spaces where they can investigate reality dispassionately with their fellow community members, and consider practical ways to improve their localities and environment.



Students at the Bahá'í-inspired Banani School in Zambia engage in academic and moral education in a supportive learning environment

The Role of the United Nations in Releasing the Collective Powers of Humankind

Since the fourth world congress on women in 1995, the discourse on advancing gender equality at the United Nations has centered largely on expanding access to power within current, imbalanced structures. This process has failed to fully address inequalities that have been perpetuated and reinforced across generations. Those who are most favored by the current ordering of society may be reluctant to work for the total transformation of a system they perceive to be of value. Therefore, it will be imperative to create spaces and opportunities for the peoples of the world to participate in processes of social change at every level of society. Many of the populations whose contributions have been overlooked believe in a spiritual dimension of existence, and seek moral solutions to crises of corruption, greed, and oppression. The move away from ethics and morality has exacerbated social ills, and has slowed the progress which could be made by harnessing both spiritual and material sources of power. The idea that equality can be established solely through material means, and that its expression is to be found in purely material indicators, is one that many are questioning. While material resources may be limited, many non-material resources are limitless and accessible to all. These include creativity and imagination, consultation and volition, discernment and insight, and the power of unified and concerted action. The discourse on gender equality at the United Nations would be strengthened by creating structures that are more inclusive, based on mutual exchange and learning, and that nurture and channel the powers of the human spirit.

“ ***Lasting gender equality can only come about by building on existing strengths, while abandoning the outmoded beliefs, cultural norms, and practices that have not served humanity’s best interests.*** ”

The successful implementation of the goals and frameworks agreed upon at the United Nations is only possible through local action. If communities are the primary arena for action, community members cannot be excluded from decision-making processes regarding their own well-being. It is particularly critical that women have a key voice in determining the process for advancing equality in their societies. Men should welcome and anxiously seek out the contributions of women, recognizing that the welfare of humankind depends on their full participation. It is crucial that women be fully involved in the spaces and processes where decisions are made about the well-being of nations, peoples, and communities. This requires, at all levels of governance, a bold shift in vision and outlook that is grounded in a firm conviction that the well-being of all people can only be secured through unwavering commitment of world leaders to the betterment of humanity as a whole. Lasting gender equality can only come about by building on existing strengths, while abandoning the outmoded beliefs, cultural norms, and practices that have not served humanity’s best interests.

What beliefs, norms, and practices will the United Nations, governments, and civil society need to adopt over the next twenty-five years to establish gender equality more fully? If the current adversarial expressions of power have ceased to be useful, how can we ensure that our means are consistent with our desired ends? Ultimately, we are seeking a healthy world that is just, diverse yet unified, and that provides opportunities for all of its inhabitants to grow and prosper. Such a world can only come into existence if women work alongside men to bring it about.

Leadership for a Culture of Equality, in Times of Peril and Peace

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 65th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—24 February 2021

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 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.

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.

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. 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.



Saba Haddad, Bahá'í International Community Representative in Geneva, at a side event to the 2025 UN Commission on the Status of Women

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 community, must be accompanied by commensurate developments at the level of culture. Lasting transformation will require a whole-of-society dedication to gender equality and a commitment to building a public life shaped by women and men in a dynamic and equal partnership, 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 international. Organizing decision-making processes around the search for collective understanding, 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 ultimately to good governance and enduring peace. The impact on men and boys can be just as significant. Providing opportunities,



Andrea Salguero, from the Bahá'í community of Canada, speaks at a BIC event during the 2025 UN Commission on the Status of Women

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 Bahá'í 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 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.”

“ *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.* ”

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.

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.

Perspective | It's time for a new conversation on power

By Saphira Rameshfar

New York—22 March 2019



The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)—the largest UN gathering on gender equality—is a momentous space, striking in the volume and variety of events to attend and people to meet. There is a magnificent display of human diversity. National costumes catch the eye. Beautiful and heart-wrenching displays throughout the halls of the United Nations provoke the mind.

Yet there was a softer, quieter moment during CSW that stood out to me. The Bahá'í International Community had just hosted a dialogue on the role of education in advancing gender equality alongside grassroots women and community practitioners and a representative from the World Bank, when a woman in attendance raised her hand and offered some thoughts on how exciting and refreshing it was to be at an event that helped us consider how to rethink the current systems and structures of society.

“The way we’ve done things has gotten us to this point. I guess we have to reimagine things if we want to move past this,” she offered.

I agreed with her sentiment but I found myself wondering why it was such a unique conversation. After all, event after event highlighted the regressions that women around the world have experienced—the backlash against female empowerment, the pushback against ideals of equality. If a system prevails that makes you work so hard for gains only to be vulnerable to losing them by one shift in policy, isn’t it obvious that the heart of our conversations and focus should be on creating a system that cannot be so easily manipulated by self-interest and fear?

“ *True power—the power to uplift, to unite for a greater good, to be just, to show compassion, to persevere, to transfigure—can be tapped into not only by individuals and groups, but by entire communities, and even by the whole of humanity.* ”

A dominant theme I noticed throughout the first week of this year’s Commission centered around power. These conversations seemed to suggest that power is a limited resource which must be taken by one group from another. This zero-sum conception of power sheds some light on why some, namely those who have it, might be reticent to give it away to those who do not. But this view of power, rooted in a system of conflict and contestation, is at odds with my own conception of it. This reading of power uses the term somewhat interchangeably with capacity, and that capacity is



A Bahá'í youth conference in Ontario, Canada, builds a growing movement for social progress through shared vision, consultation, and action

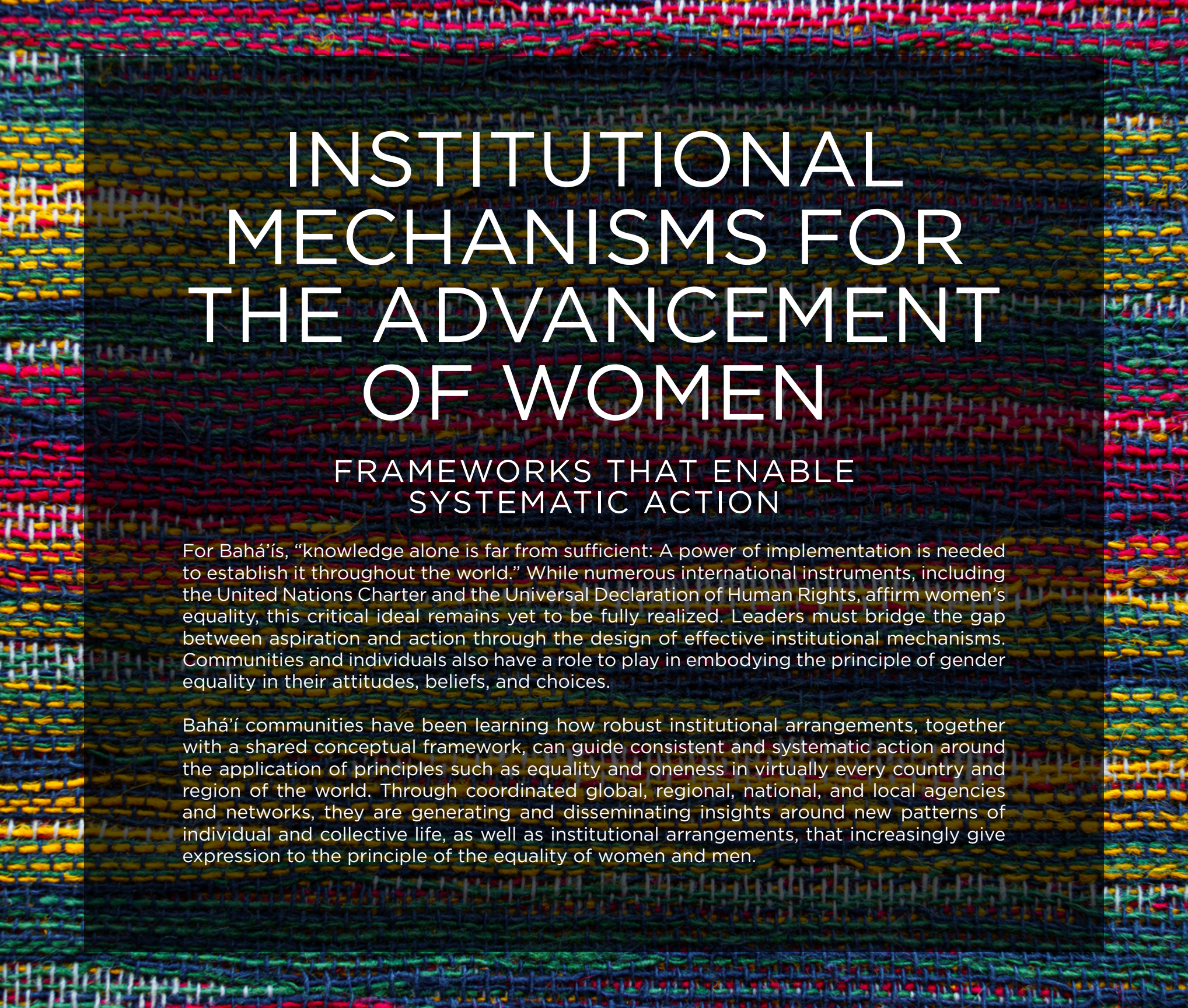
often cast in terms of domination and oppression. Yet I view power as a limitless resource that one can channel to enact great things in the world. If the capacity to enact is used towards nefarious ends, in my mind, that is not true power. That is force and coercion that has been glorified by the appellation power, when it, in fact, represents a weakness in human character and a defect in the social order.

True power—the power to uplift, to unite for a greater good, to be just, to show compassion, to persevere, to transfigure—can be tapped into not only by individuals and groups, but by entire communities, and even by the whole of humanity. This kind of power, which I attribute to the spiritual dimension of existence, can also be released, and this is the kind of power that I associate with empowerment. If one's conception of power is expanded to include the capacities for unity and integration that yield collective prosperity and well-being, then one's conception of governance, authority, and legitimacy must likewise be expanded.

All those committed to advancing the cause of gender equality are at a pivotal moment. As we take steps to prepare for the historic 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2020, there is a key opportunity before us to reshape the conversation around power and empowerment. Will we continue to focus on perpetuating a system that has so often failed us, or will we bend our energies, time and resources towards creating a new one that has the power to uplift us all?

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This piece is a personal reflection of Saphira Rameshfar, Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations between 2015 and 2023.



INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

FRAMEWORKS THAT ENABLE SYSTEMATIC ACTION

For Bahá'ís, “knowledge alone is far from sufficient: A power of implementation is needed to establish it throughout the world.” While numerous international instruments, including the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, affirm women's equality, this critical ideal remains yet to be fully realized. Leaders must bridge the gap between aspiration and action through the design of effective institutional mechanisms. Communities and individuals also have a role to play in embodying the principle of gender equality in their attitudes, beliefs, and choices.

Bahá'í communities have been learning how robust institutional arrangements, together with a shared conceptual framework, can guide consistent and systematic action around the application of principles such as equality and oneness in virtually every country and region of the world. Through coordinated global, regional, national, and local agencies and networks, they are generating and disseminating insights around new patterns of individual and collective life, as well as institutional arrangements, that increasingly give expression to the principle of the equality of women and men.



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The most momentous question of this day is international peace and arbitration, and universal peace is impossible without universal suffrage.

— Bahá'í holy writings

Turning Point for All Nations

Excerpt from a Statement of the Bahá'í International Community on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations

New York—1 October 1995

Advancing the Status of Women

The creation of a peaceful and sustainable world civilization will be impossible without the full participation of women in every arena of human activity.³⁵ While this proposition is increasingly supported, there is a marked difference between intellectual acceptance and its implementation.

It is time for the institutions of the world, composed mainly of men, to use their influence to promote the systematic inclusion of women, not out of condescension or presumed self-sacrifice but as an act motivated by the belief that the contributions of women are required for society to progress.³⁶ Only as the contributions of women are valued will they be sought out and woven into the fabric of society. The result will be a more peaceful, balanced, just, and prosperous civilization.³⁷

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The obvious biological differences between the sexes need not be a cause for inequality or disunity. Rather, they are an aspect of complementarity. If the role of women as mothers is properly valued, their work in nurturing and educating children will be respected and properly rewarded. It should also be acknowledged that the child-bearing role does not diminish one's aptitude for leadership, or undermine one's intellectual, scientific or creative capacity. Indeed, it may be an enhancement.

We believe progress on a few critical fronts would have the greatest impact on the advancement of women. We share the following perspectives which are foundational to the recommendations which follow.

First and foremost, violence against women and girls, one of the most blatant and widespread abuses of human rights, must be eradicated. Violence has been a fact of life for many women throughout the world, regardless of race, class, or educational background. In many societies, traditional beliefs that women are inferior or a burden make them easy targets of anger and frustration. Even strong legal remedies and enforcement mechanisms will have little effect until they are supported by a transformation in the attitudes of men. Women will not be safe until a new social conscience



Hatem El-Hady, BIC Representative in Cairo, Egypt, speaks on a panel at the 2023 UN COP climate conference in Dubai, UAE

takes hold, one which will make the mere expression of condescending attitudes towards women, let alone any form of physical violence, a cause for deep shame.

Second, the family remains the basic building block of society and behaviors observed and learned there will be projected onto interactions at all other levels of society. Therefore, the members of the institution of the family must be transformed so that the principle of equality of women and men is internalized. Further, if the bonds of love and unity cement family relationships, the impact will reach beyond its borders and affect society as a whole.

Third, while the overall goal of any society must be to educate all its members, at this stage in human history the greatest need is to educate women and girls.³⁸ For over twenty years, studies have consistently documented that, of all possible investments, educating women and girls pays the highest overall dividends in terms of social development, the eradication of poverty, and the advancement of community.³⁹

Fourth, the global dialogue on the role of men and women must promote recognition of the intrinsic complementarity of the two sexes. For the differences between them are a natural assertion of the necessity of women and men to work together to bring to fruition their potentialities for advancing civilization, no less than for perpetuating the human race. Such differences are inherent in the interactive character of their common humanity. This dialogue needs to consider the historical forces which have led to the oppression of women and examine the new social, political, and spiritual realities which are today transforming our civilization.



In Bahá'í communities, female students are encouraged to develop intellectual capacities and contribute to the life of society

As a starting point for this dialogue we offer this analogy from the Bahá'í Writings: “The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible.”⁴⁰ In addition, we support the following three specific measures.

1. Increasing the Participation of Women in Member State Delegations

We recommend that member states be encouraged to appoint an increased number of women to ambassadorial or similar diplomatic positions.

2. Encouraging Universal Ratification of International Conventions that Protect Women's Rights and Improve their Status

As with the international conventions on human rights, the Secretary-General and all bodies of the UN should consider every opportunity to encourage member states to proceed with ratification of conventions and protocols that protect women's rights and seek their advancement.

3. Planning Ahead for Implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action

The Forward-Looking Strategies declaration adopted at the Nairobi conference was highly bold and imaginative, yet its implementation was rather ineffective.⁴¹ We believe that a lesson should be learned from this unfortunate experience and deliberate plans be put into place to ensure that the Platform of Action emerging from the Beijing conference does not meet a similar fate.

We propose that a monitoring system be established to prepare status reports on the implementation of adopted measures and to make presentations to the General Assembly annually, highlighting the top twenty and bottom twenty member states in terms of compliance.

Endnotes

- 35 “When all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed. Without equality this will be impossible because all differences and distinction are conducive to discord and strife. Equality between men and women is conducive to the abolition of warfare for the reason that women will never be willing to sanction it. Mothers will not give their sons as sacrifices upon the battlefield after twenty years of anxiety and loving devotion in rearing them from infancy, no matter what cause they are called upon to defend. There is no doubt that when women obtain equality of rights, war will entirely cease among mankind.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Comp. Howard MacNutt. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust. 1982.) pp.174-175.
- 36 “Let it be known once more that until woman and man recognize and realize equality, social and political progress here or anywhere will not be possible. For the world of humanity consists of two parts or members: one is woman; the other is man. Until these two members are equal in strength, the oneness of humanity cannot be established, and the happiness and felicity of mankind will not be a reality. God willing, this is to be so.” From a Talk by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Federation of Women’s Clubs, Chicago, Illinois on 2 May 1912. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust. 1982.) p.77.
- 37 “The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting—force is losing its weight and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine, and more permeated with the feminine ideals—or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in John E. Esslemont, *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era*, p. 156., 4th rev. ed., 1976, Wilmette: Bahá’í Books, published by Pyramid Publications for Bahá’í Publishing Trust.
- 38 This principle, that women and girls should receive priority over men and boys in access to education, has been a long-standing principle in the Bahá’í teachings. Speaking in 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said: “In proclaiming the oneness of mankind [Bahá’u’lláh] taught that men and women are equal in the sight of God and that there is no distinction to be made between them. The only difference between them now is due to lack of education and training. If woman is given equal opportunity of education, distinction and estimate of inferiority will disappear.... Furthermore, the education of women is of greater importance than the education of men, for they are the mothers of the race, and mothers rear the children. The first teachers of children are the mothers. Therefore, they must be capably trained in order to educate both sons and daughters. There are many provisions in the words of Bahá’u’lláh in regard to this. “He promulgated the adoption of the same course of education for man and woman. Daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Comp. Howard MacNutt. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust. 1982.) pp.174-175.
- 39 Lawrence H. Summers, Vice President & Chief Economist for the World Bank, *Investing in All the People*. 1992. Also, USAID. 1989. *Technical Reports in Gender and Development. Making the Case for the Gender Variable: Women and the Wealth and Well-being of Nations*. Office of Women in Development.
- 40 Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Translated by a Committee at the Bahá’í World Centre and by Marzieh Gail. (Great Britain: W & J. Mackay Ltd. 1978.) p.302.

Mobilizing Institutional, Legal and Cultural Resources to Achieve Gender Equality

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 52nd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—1 February 2008

The central role of girls and women in the development of families, communities, and nations has been clearly established: women are the first educators of the next generation; their education has a tremendous impact on the family's physical, social and economic well-being; their economic participation increases productivity and drives economic progress; their presence in public life has been associated with better governance and lower levels of corruption. No country, however, has yet achieved a full measure of gender equality. While women bear the most direct costs of this persistent inequality, the progress of all facets of human society is hindered as half of the world's population is held back from realizing its potential.

The last several decades have produced landmark documents elaborating the rights of women, calling for an end to all forms of discrimination against women, and outlining strategies to advance gender equality.¹ The systematic implementation of these measures will no doubt require a careful re-thinking of budget priorities and processes. Financing this effort, however, is only part of the equation. As the Bahá'í International Community noted in its statement to the 51st Commission on the Status of Women, a massive divide still separates the legal apparatus and the culture—embodied in values and institutional norms—required to achieve gender equality.² A comprehensive approach to financing gender equality will need to address the constellation of cultural, institutional, and legal obstacles holding back the urgently needed progress of half of the world's population.

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1 The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, The Beijing Platform for Action, the Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security along with the Millennium Development Goals have provided a vision and concrete plans for action.

2 Bahá'í International Community. (2006). *Beyond Legal Reforms: Culture and Capacity in the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls*. New York.



In Bucharest, Romania, a three-day community festival inspired by Bahá'í service activities was held with support of city officials

From this perspective, we offer three measures for governments' consideration: (a) the adoption of a long-term perspective to guide short and medium-term efforts to finance gender equality; (b) the use of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to evaluate national budgets; and (c) the engagement of religious perspectives and institutions.

Adoption of a long-term perspective

To articulate a coherent and compelling vision of gender equality, leaders will need to move away from a predominantly crisis-driven, reactive mode of operation. Alongside short-term goals, they will need to frame policies from a long-term perspective, unconstrained by the intellectual straightjacket of election cycles. An exclusive focus on short-term goals too often falls prey to minimum standards, narrow orientations and compromise positions. A long-term orientation,



A Bahá'í children's class in Brasília, Brazil fosters moral education and unity among young participants through creative and collaborative activities

looking ahead one, two, or more generations, would allow governments to explore a wider range of policy and programmatic options and to consider a diversity of contributions—including those from nongovernmental, business, academic, and informal sectors.³

³ Given that it takes approximately 17 years for an individual to complete secondary education and approximately 20 years to complete higher education, a long-term perspective can more fully take into account and seek to shape the educational resources of a nation.

The first pillar of the long-term approach is a consensus about the broader goals of development and the outcomes to be achieved. Governments will need to articulate the goals of gender equality in terms of the well-being of society as a whole: its boys, girls, men, women; its peace and security, health and well-being, economic progress, environmental sustainability, and its institutions of governance. The second pillar of the long-term approach involves the measurement of progress towards stated goals. Even in instances where a country may be sensitive to the gender dimension, it often lacks the monitoring tools and systems to gauge the impact of its policies on girls and women. As such, the development of indicators will be essential to determine the effectiveness of financing initiatives. Given the diversity of national and local contexts, one-size-fits-all indicators will not be feasible—each region will need to develop tools most appropriate to its circumstances. The Bahá’í International Community looks forward to participating in discussions about this important initiative.

“ *... the advancement of women is not a privilege, a technical exercise, or a magic bullet. It is part of a broader exercise of creating an ordered society in which relationships between men and women, parents and children, employees and employers, the governors and the governed adhere to principles of justice and emulate the highest aspirations of humankind.* ”

Aligning national budgets with human rights standards

Our second recommendation to governments concerns measures to bring national budgets into compliance with international human rights standards. Far from being value neutral, a government’s budget reflects the values of the country—whom it values, whose work it values, and what it rewards.⁴ While budgets are not typically formulated with a gender perspective, the proliferation of Gender Budget Initiatives suggests that these worlds are gradually coming together to bring budgeting processes in line with state obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This type of gender analysis helps to identify gender inequalities in budget processes, allocations, and outcomes; and assesses states’ responsibilities to address these inequalities.⁵ For the rights-based approach to be effective, however, it must take into account not only women but rather their entire life cycle—from birth to childhood and youth—as discrimination begins and compounds in these early stages.

The rights-based approach is not without precedent. A number of countries have successfully empowered women politically, boosted their rate of participation in the labor force, and helped to facilitate a balance between work

4 Budlender, D. (ed.) (1996). *The Women’s Budget*, Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), Cape Town.

5 Elson, Diane. (2006). *Budgeting for Women’s Rights: Monitoring Government Budgets for Compliance with CEDAW*. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM); New York.



Faith communities in Papua New Guinea mark World Religion Day with an interfaith gathering, described as a first for the country

and family life.⁶ Governments would be well served by examining closely the practices of those countries which have achieved a measure of success with these seemingly intractable problems. Norway, which the United Nations Development Programme has ranked highest on the Gender-related development index and the Gender empowerment measure, may serve as a useful example. An analysis of effective gender-specific policies and the legal, institutional, and cultural obstacles to the adoption of such policies in other countries would help to formulate policy recommendations on the basis of concrete examples.

6 Hausmann, Ricardo, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi.(2007). *The Global Gender Gap Report 2007*. World Economic Forum: Davos, Switzerland.

Engaging religion and religious leaders

Too often, policy makers have been resistant to addressing the cultural and religious dimensions of attitudes governing the treatment of women—fearing the potentially divisive nature of such an undertaking or lacking knowledge about whom to address and how to proceed. Yet the achievement of gender equality has been painstakingly slow precisely because questions about the roles and responsibilities of women challenge some of the most deeply entrenched human attitudes. Given the tremendous capacity of religion to influence the masses—both to inspire and to vilify—governments cannot afford to turn a blind eye.

In the absence of a sustained dialogue between governments and religions, religious extremism flourishes. Fuelled at various times by poverty, instability, the socio-economic changes accompanying globalization and access to information technologies, radical religious voices have exerted tremendous influence on politics and public policy. Among the casualties of this development has been the role of women in public life as evidenced, in some parts of the world, by ... narrowly defined notions of a woman's place in the family, the community, and the world. The decrease in funding for women's rights has been partly attributed to these social and cultural shifts. Complicating matters further is the fact that many states continue to hide behind cultural and religious reservations to international treaties concerning the rights of women. Today—nearly sixty years after adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and 26 years after CEDAW entered into force—governments can no longer ignore religious practices and doctrines that stand in flagrant violation of international human rights standards. These must be subject to examination and scrutiny.

Despite this challenging reality, religious organizations constitute some of the oldest, far-reaching networks in the world. In many conflict-torn countries, they are the only surviving institutions. In the areas of health, environment, debt relief and humanitarian support, it is religious organizations that have been at the forefront of efforts to reach neglected areas and to influence government policy. Furthermore, given the tremendous weight of religion and culture in shaping perceptions about the role of women in society, religious organizations and constituencies will need to be meaningfully engaged in efforts to further the gender equality agenda. While at first, the language of finance and economics appears incompatible with that of ethics and values (common to religions), both governments and religious organizations need to become familiar with each other's rationale and perspectives—recognizing that these concern the same reality. An equitable economic system is not possible without agreement about underlying values; and notions of ethics and values divorced from economic conditions will not be realized.

By adopting a long-term perspective, working to align national budgets with human rights obligations, and engaging with religions, governments can mobilize the institutional, cultural and legal resources that facilitate efforts to finance gender equality. It must be borne in mind, however, that the advancement of women is not a privilege, a technical exercise, or a magic bullet. It is part of a broader exercise of creating an ordered society in which relationships between men and women, parents and children, employees and employers, the governors and the governed adhere to principles of justice and emulate the highest aspirations of humankind.

Reimagining the Role of Institutions in Building Gender-Equal Societies

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

New York—22 February 2024

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.

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?

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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



In Zambian villages, consultations among women lead to social initiatives such as a literacy program

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.

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.



In Katuyola, Zambia, traditional leaders, families, and Bahá'í agencies explore ways to improve local education

To promote progress toward gender-equal societies, institutional structures need to embrace a mode of continual adaptation in response 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 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.

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.

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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 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 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.

A Governance Befitting: Humanity and the Path Toward a Just Global Order

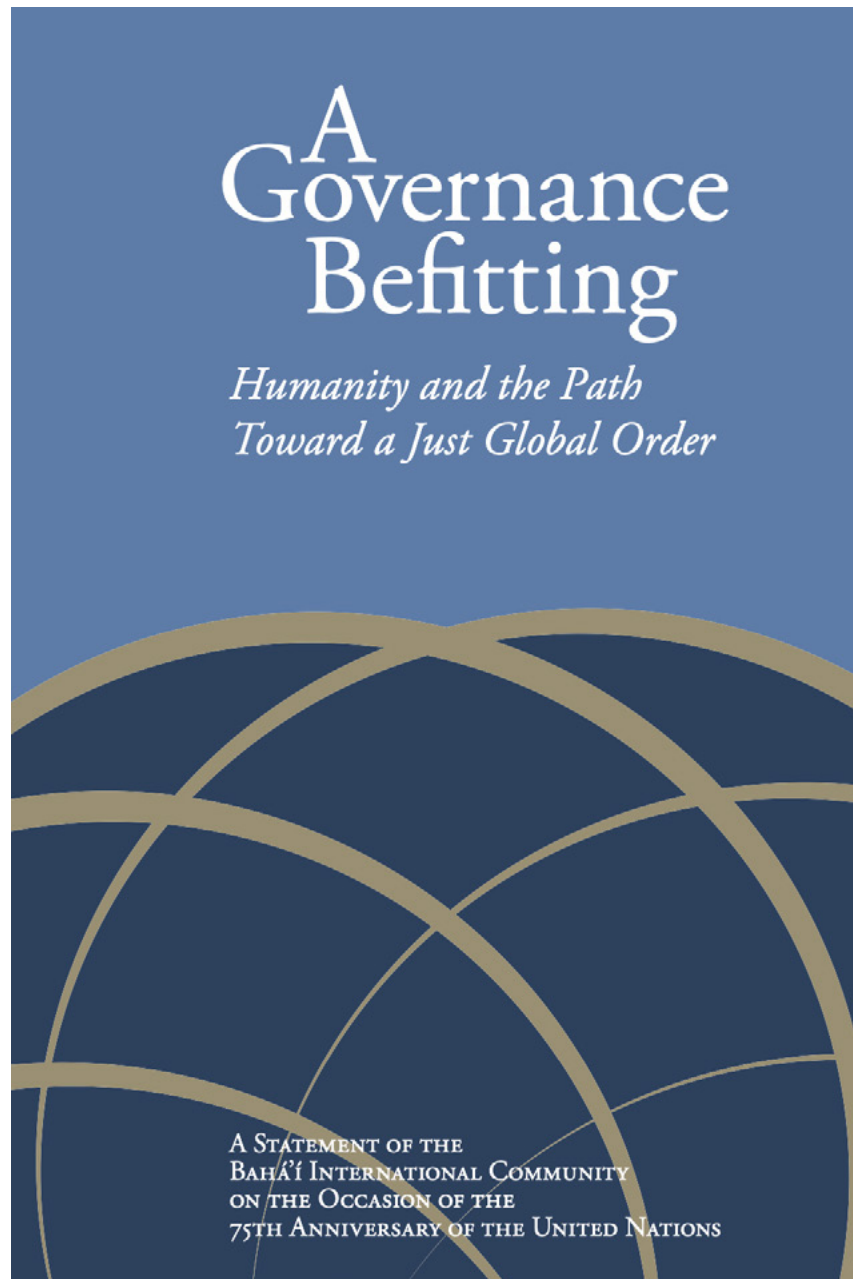
Excerpt from a Statement of the Bahá'í International Community on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations

New York—21 September 2020

The world the international community has committed itself to build—in which violence and corruption have given way to peace and good governance, for example, and where the equality of women and men has been infused into every facet of social life—has never yet existed. Progress toward the goals enshrined in global agendas



The Bahá'í International Community and the Coalition for the UN We Need co-host a discussion after the 2024 UN Summit of the Future, to explore renewing trust in the UN



Cover book of A Governance Befitting

therefore calls for a conscious orientation toward experimentation, search, innovation, and creativity. As these processes unfold, the moral framework already defined by the United Nations Charter must be applied with increasing fidelity. Respect for international law, upholding fundamental human rights, adherence to treaties and agreements—only to the extent that such commitments are honored in practice can the United Nations and its Member States demonstrate a standard of integrity and trustworthiness before the people of the world. Barring this, no amount of administrative reorganization will resolve the host of long-standing challenges before us. As Bahá'u'lláh declared, “Words must be supported by deeds, for deeds are the true test of words.”

“ *Progress toward the goals enshrined in global agendas therefore calls for a conscious orientation toward experimentation, search, innovation, and creativity.* ”

Embracing Interdependence: Foundations for a World in Transition

Excerpts from a Statement of the Bahá'í International Community on the Occasion of the United Nations Summit of the Future
New York—4 September 2024

Reconceptualizing human nature is no simple task, but it can have a profound impact on the relationships that sustain society. Take, for example, dominant approaches to justice which typically seek accountability and retribution as their primary objective. While evidently holding merit in specific contexts, these approaches cannot be the end of the analysis in an interdependent world, for they can have the effect of breeding vengeance, reinforcing division, or stoking mistrust and resentment. Conceptions of justice must therefore begin to include the important task of bringing about unity and well-being.

...

Questioning underlying assumptions through the lens of expanded notions of justice would also need to be applied to other areas of existence—peace and security, youth and future generations, science and technology, gender equality, and global governance, to name a few. For if portions of the world continue to prioritize their own short-term flourishing at the expense of others, an imbalance will eventually cause those nations—and humanity in its entirety—to face the inevitable consequences of that injustice. Confronting these and other similar questions will allow the international community to overcome deadlock and to work toward devising and implementing constructive and enduring solutions.

...

A shared framework: Laying a foundation for transformation

The ideas offered thus far outline a common framework founded on the unreserved acceptance of humanity's interdependence. While many assert the values at the heart of this framework, its effective application is often challenged as unrealistic. What would this look like in practice?

For its part, the worldwide Bahá'í community, together with friends, colleagues, and citizens from every walk of life, have been gaining experience around how to promote peaceful and prosperous societies through the application of this framework, with evidence of notable and constructive transformation in individual lives, community dynamics, and institutional arrangements. Taking shape in virtually every country and region of the world, these efforts are guided and supported by institutional arrangements from the local to the international level. Such arrangements enable the generation and dissemination of insights and best practices across the globe, which have been widely adopted and implemented according to local circumstances.



Bahá'í International Community representatives at a UN conference room during the 2024 Commission on the Status of Women

Many of the initiatives carried out by Bahá'í communities begin with the creation of consultative spaces in villages or neighborhoods that invite members of their societies, irrespective of background or belief, to better understand their material and social reality, and devise appropriate responses to the challenges they face. On numerous occasions, these spaces have given rise to short term social and economic development initiatives, such as educational campaigns, health projects, environmental awareness actions, or humanitarian assistance efforts.



Ahead of the 2024 UN Summit of the Future, youth from several countries share their views in a short film, Embracing Interdependence

Over time, many of these efforts draw increased local or national support through an ongoing process of consultation on the application of this shared framework. Some initiatives gradually assume greater degrees of complexity including, but not limited to, projects aimed at teacher-training and literacy, women's empowerment, food security, social cohesion, as well as artistic expressions to inspire action. Notably, this transformative process has resulted in the proliferation of discrete development initiatives—from 400 to 200,000 in over 180 nations and territories within the last decade—as local populations build the capacities and qualities needed to sustain long-term progress.

In practice, these communities have seen that embracing humanity's oneness holds a wide range of implications on the manner in which they approach societal progress—that adversarial approaches to problem-solving, no matter how noble the cause they support, are limited in achieving enduring transformation; that differences of opinion are an opportunity to explore values and strategies from diverse perspectives; that every member of society has the capacity,

right, and responsibility to contribute to the common good; and that a hopeful future is within reach, through conscious and dedicated effort.

“ ***Conceptions of justice must therefore begin to include the important task of bringing about unity and well-being.*** ”

The lessons learned from these experiences which unfold within a culturally responsive and inclusive common framework are profound. Commitment to principles is far from a naive aspiration. It strikes a resonant chord among populations, and fosters the creation of unified communities of action that can contribute effectively to a global vision. The task at hand is, indeed, achievable; if steps toward a new conceptual framework are taken, millions around the world are prepared to support and encourage its advancement.

Perspective | Reorganizing the women's movement for the next steps forward

By *Saphira Rameshfar*

New York—14 March 2022



Governance at the international level will require new systems and structures that are more suited to the challenges facing humanity today. But advances in the operation of those systems—the way we human beings function within them—will be equally important. This was central to the vision of systematic progress laid out in the Bahá'í International Community's statement, *A Governance Befitting: Humanity and the Path Toward a Just Global Order*. "Deliberative processes will need to be more magnanimous, reasoned, and cordial," it suggested, "motivated not by attachment to entrenched positions and narrow interests but by a collective search for deeper understanding of complex issues."

This is as true in the international women's movement as anywhere else. While ideals of solidarity and universal sisterhood were central to its emergence and, indeed, its power and many accomplishments, the path to social change has increasingly come to be defined in terms of opposition, conflict, and a readiness to fight. Such methods have indeed played a role in bringing attention to structures of oppression, and countering specific acts of injustice. Yet time and again, those who are agreed in opposition to something—a policy, a law, a leader—have found that they have little consensus about what should replace it, nor about the root causes that gave rise to it. To build a more gender-equal world—and not just dismantle a gender-oppressive one—it becomes clear that modes of functioning will need to develop the capacity to channel far more robustly the generative power of cooperation, reciprocity, shared endeavor, and unified aspiration.

The need for change can be seen with particular clarity in the experience of those laboring within the women's movement. A simple fact confronts every fair-minded observer: the inherent nobility of working to advance the cause of gender equality does not, in itself, protect the women's movement from the pitfalls of division and adversarialism. This may be painful to admit. Yet too many of us have seen the bitter fruit that such disunity inevitably yields: feminists bullying and criticizing one another; activists competing against one another for funding, recognition, power, and access; actors of all kinds advancing their own interests at the expense of others.

This is not the world we aspire to. Thankfully, alternatives based on justice and generosity, respect and reciprocity are readily available. The work ahead lies in instilling the necessary values into the architecture, machinery, and day-to-day mechanics of the women's movement. The ways we come together to discuss our issues, make our decisions, and carry out our plans must reflect and engender a growing sense that we are one in purpose, action, and aspiration—this in full celebration of the vibrancy and importance of our diversity.



Núr University in Bolivia, a Bahá'í-inspired institution, integrates academic excellence with social responsibility

What does this look like in practice? This is a question that will need to be explored on a case-by-case basis, in light of the circumstances unique to any given arena of activity. Processes of deliberation, for example, often suffer from a model of representation in which advocates operate at the international level but are obliged to report back to their headquarters on advances made for their specific organization. This breeds, in collective spaces, an atmosphere of activists talking past one another, each focused on advancing her own agenda and priorities, or worse yet, actively working to undermine or outdo one another.

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aspiration.***

Needed instead, if the complex challenges before the women's movement and humanity as a whole are to be addressed, is a process of principled consultation that focuses on building consensus about the truth of any given situation and determining the wisest course of action among available options. In such a consultative process, individual participants strive to transcend their respective points of view, and function instead as members of a shared endeavor with its own interests and goals. In an atmosphere characterized by both candor and courtesy, ideas belong not to the individual to whom they occur, but to the group as a whole. Truth is not treated as a compromise between opposing interest groups, nor are participants animated by the desire to control one another. The aim is to harness the power of unified thought and action.

How might the women's movement organize itself according to principles such as these?

Taking steps in this direction will require changes at the level of personal conscience and conduct. It will require thousands of us to, for example, enter collaborative spaces with the primary goal of solving a problem or taking a next step forward, rather than gaining attention or building a reputation. This is a different aim altogether, and it engenders an entirely different style of engagement and demeanor.

Yet equally important will be making the structural changes necessary to foster more effective patterns of personal and institutional interaction. The way democratic processes are carried out, for example, often mirror some of the worst aspects of partisanship and adversarialism evident in political systems around the world. Notwithstanding the commendable qualities and characteristics that individuals naturally bring to a role of leadership, the structural incentives in systems for choosing leaders tend to amplify and reinforce other traits, such as desire for leadership, focus on personal ambition, and size of ego.

The women's movement needs to offer to the world a model that is strikingly stark in contrast—an example of what equality looks like at its highest and best, and what it can accomplish. Everything about the way we organize ourselves needs to be designed to reduce the odds and severity of conflict. Our systems need to prioritize collaboration, the flow

of learning, and the agility needed to address the urgent needs of women around the world. And ours needs to be a culture that is open and welcoming for others to join.

If this vision seems idealistic to some, the statement A Governance Befitting suggests that the very opposite is true: what is far-fetched today is the hope that global ills of inequality, oppression, and violence could be solved through the patterns of difference and division that gave rise to them. “What was once viewed as an idealistic vision of international cooperation,” the statement declares, “has, in light of the obvious and serious challenges facing humanity, become a pragmatic necessity.” Let the women’s movement take its rightful place in pioneering the institutional tools necessary to bring about a better and more equal world.

* * *

This piece is a personal reflection of Saphira Rameshfar, Representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the United Nations between 2015 and 2023.

From thought to action: BIC coalesces with other actors around momentous GEAR campaign

New York—30 July 2010

Stretching back as far as the first United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) held in 1947, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) United Nations office has been actively advancing the principle of gender equality. Recognizing that awareness of the principle must be combined with the power of implementation, the BIC, together with a number of NGOs, was deeply involved in supporting the creation of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

A coalition of more than 275 organizations in 50 countries came together to form the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) campaign, an effort that many say was critical in the effort for UN Women to be approved by the General Assembly.

“We are very pleased about the creation of this new agency,” said Bani Dugal, the Principal Representative of the BIC, who led many early discussions around the campaign as Chair of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, and later as Co-Convenor of the GEAR campaign.

“It is an important step, and it will hopefully give greater impetus and coherence to the work of the United Nations in its work for gender equality and the advancement of women.”

Coinciding with the 10th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, civil society began raising concerns at the UN World Summit in 2005 about the lack of dialogue on women's rights and gender equality in the UN reform agenda. These conversations sparked growing demand for the development of institutional mechanisms to protect and advance the rights of women across the UN system.

“We want the agenda of women's rights to be at the table of all of the policy-making of the UN, and we want that to be true at the country level, as well,” said one representative of the GEAR campaign.

The opportunity to take action emerged in 2006 when Secretary-General Kofi Annan established the UN Coherence Panel, aimed at eliminating duplication and competition among UN agencies. The following year, NGOs came together at CSW and focused on the importance of addressing gender equality within the coherence agenda. Soon after, the GEAR campaign was formed.

“There's been human rights organizations, development organizations, men and women around the world that have been really supportive of this effort and have worked actively with us in the trenches to make it, to realize this dream,” said a member of the coalition.

Through this initiative, a shared understanding emerged that the four existing UN agencies focused on women's rights and gender equality—the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)—should be merged to create a stronger, more unified entity with coherent goals and improved funding.



Representatives of the Gender Equality Reform Campaign, including BIC's Bani Dugal, met Kofi Annan ahead of UN Women's 2010 launch

The campaign's efforts culminated in June 2010, when GEAR representatives presented a petition—signed by 34,555 individuals from 165 countries and territories—to General Assembly President Ali Abdussalam Treki, calling for the establishment of a new UN body for women and gender equality. A month later, UN Women was officially created.

“Our hope now is that governments will fully fund UN Women, so that it can deliver on its promises,” said Ms. Dugal.

“We also want UN Women to engage with civil society in a substantive manner at all levels—global, regional and national.”

At the heart of the BIC's engagement in this effort was a commitment to the principle of the oneness of humanity, which implies that every individual must be treated with dignity, irrespective of sex, and that the work of bringing about a gender equal world requires universal participation, which involves meaningful reform within the UN system. In the words of one GEAR campaign representative, “gender equality is integral to all of the work that the UN does. And it's really important that UN Women does achieve that goal and becomes this model for the UN—the UN of the future.”

HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN

EMBRACING THE INHERENT DIGNITY OF ALL

The Bahá'í teachings affirm that the soul has no gender and that all human beings are inherently equal; in this sense, human rights are a vehicle for all to realize their intrinsic potential and to ensure that dignity and respect are afforded without exception. Significantly, at the end of the twentieth century, women's rights were unequivocally recognized as human rights. Yet in every country of the world, women still face discrimination, exclusion, and harassment. All people, men and women alike, have a duty to respect the human rights of every individual. Governments have an urgent responsibility to uphold rights, condemn violations, and hold perpetrators accountable.

Such efforts must be complemented with an approach to education that inculcates populations with a profound understanding of and appreciation for the inherent dignity of every human being. Bahá'í communities are working with like-minded collaborators to implement a global system of education that brings individuals from diverse walks of life together to reflect on the implications of principles such as justice and the interconnectedness of all individuals, as well as to work for the betterment of their shared societies.

“

At the time of elections the right to vote is the inalienable right of women, and the entrance of women into all human departments is an irrefutable and incontrovertible question.

— Bahá'í holy writings

Freedom to Believe: Upholding the Standard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Excerpts from the Bahá'í International Community's Statement on the Freedom of Conscience, Religion, or Belief

New York—1 October 2005

Over fifty years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights boldly proclaimed the inherent dignity and the equal rights of all members of the human family. Guided by the vision of equality for all, the Declaration enshrined the fundamental right of every human being to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Despite the international community's unanimous adoption of this Declaration and its codification in subsequent instruments of international law, the world bears witness to persistent intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, the proliferation of violence in the name of religion, the manipulation of religion in the interest of political ideology, and increasing tensions between religion and State policies. The rising tide of religious extremism has fuelled these developments, threatening security, human development, and efforts towards peace. Widespread violations of this right—most often targeting women and minorities—have continued. Given the interdependence of human rights, such violations have compromised, among others, the right to education, employment, peaceful assembly, citizenship, political participation, health, and at times, life itself. Indeed, the promise of freedom of religion or belief for all remains one of the most contested and pressing human rights of our time.

...

Ultimately, a long-term preventive strategy must be rooted in efforts to educate children and adults alike, equipping them with literacy skills and opportunities to learn about other systems of belief. Within a culture of education, people who can read the writings of their own religion as well as those of others, who are free to question and discuss, and who are able to participate in the generation and application of knowledge will be better prepared to counter the forces of ignorance and fanaticism.

The protection of the freedom of religion or belief must also entail vigilance in safeguarding citizens from the forces of extreme orthodoxy. Incitement to violence, extremism, or hostility in the name of religion must be forcefully sanctioned and unreservedly condemned.¹⁷ Similarly, States must consistently uphold the equality of women and men as a moral



*The UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, where sessions addressing human rights and gender equality are held
(UN Photo/Elma Okic)*

principle and article of international law, condemning actions in the name of religion, which deny human dignity and freedom of conscience to women. Ultimately, a long-term preventive strategy must be rooted in efforts to educate children and adults alike, equipping them with literacy skills and opportunities to learn about other systems of belief. Within a culture of education, people who can read the writings of their own religion as well as those of others, who are free to question and discuss, and who are able to participate in the generation and application of knowledge will be better prepared to counter the forces of ignorance and fanaticism.¹⁸

...



Simin Fahandej, Bahá'í International Community Representative in Geneva, addresses the UN Human Rights Council on Bahá'í rights in Iran

The United Nations needs to comprehensively and definitively address religious extremism as a major obstacle in the processes of peace.²⁰ While the United Nations has denounced religious intolerance and persecution, it has been hesitant to acknowledge and forcefully condemn religious extremism motivating violent and terrorist acts.²¹ As women often bear the greatest burden of religious extremism and ensuing violations of human freedoms, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women should consider formulating a comment on issues specific to women's freedom of religion or belief.²²

Endnotes

- 1 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, U.N. Doc A/810 at 71 (1948). New York: United Nations. The Declaration was adopted with no dissenting votes, with eight countries abstaining from approval: Poland, Byelorussia, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Yugoslavia, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, and the Soviet Union.
- 2 No fewer than 28 international human rights instruments contain provisions specifically pertaining to freedom of religion or belief.
- 3 Civil and Political Rights, Including Religious Intolerance: Report submitted by Mr. Abdelfattah Amor, Special Rapporteur, in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 1998/18. U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1999/58 (1999).
- ...
- 17 The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights prohibits, “any advocacy or national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.” Similarly, as called for in the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960), States should condemn and forcefully sanction those who, in the name of religion, use education and the media to oppress freedom of conscience and to promote division, hatred, terrorism, violence, and bloodshed.
- 18 The former Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Abdelfattah Amor, emphasized education—particularly concerning human rights—as a key component of establishing a culture of tolerance and non-discrimination. Mr. Amor convened the 2001 International Consultative Conference on School Education in relation with Freedom of Religion and Belief, Tolerance and Non-discrimination and called on participants to design a worldwide education strategy for combating intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. (U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1999/58).
- ...
- 20 Civil and Political Rights, Including Religious Intolerance, *supra* note 3, 125 (a).
- 21 The UN has been reticent to identify religious fanaticism as a source of terrorism, referring to it indirectly, as for example, “terrorism motivated by intolerance or extremism” (S/RES/1373 (2001)). Even the various resolutions issued by the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the Commission on Human Rights in response to the terrorist acts of 11 September 2001, failed to identify religious fanaticism as the force fuelling these acts.
- 22 Tahzib-Lie, Bahia G. (2004). “Dissenting Women, Religion or Belief, and the State: Contemporary Challenges that Require Attention.” In Lindholm, T., Durham, W. Cole Jr., Tahzib-Lie, Bahia G. (Eds.) *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Deskbook*. Oslo, Norway: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

Ten Bahá'í women executed together 40 years ago: Global campaign honors them in support of gender equality in Iran, calling for public creative contributions

Geneva—15 May 2023

The day of 18 June 2023 will mark 40 years since the Islamic Republic of Iran hanged 10 Bahá'í women in a single night in a square in the city of Shiraz. Their crime was refusing to renounce their belief in a faith that promotes the principles of gender equality—absent and criminalized in Iran—as well as unity, justice, and truthfulness.

The women were hanged one by one, each forced to watch the next woman's death in a harrowing attempt to coerce them into recanting their faith. One was only 17; most were in their 20s. Human rights groups and ordinary citizens around the world were shocked and outraged at this barbaric act by the Iranian authorities.

Global leaders at the time led a wave of appeals for condemned Bahá'í women and men to be released from their death sentences. But to no avail.

“More and more Iranians are uniting in a search for social justice, and they have focused on the equality of women and men as one of the most pressing challenges facing the country.”

The Bahá'í International Community (BIC) is now launching a global campaign, called #OurStoryIsOne, to honor the executed women and the long struggle for gender equality lived by women of all faiths and backgrounds in Iran for many decades and which continues to this day.

“The story of the 10 Bahá'í women is not over. It was a chapter in the unfolding story of Iranian women's resilience and sacrifice for equality,” says Simin Fahandej, Representative of the BIC to the United Nations in Geneva. “Today, in the blood, tears and wounds of thousands of young women in Iran seeking equality, we can see echoes of the injustice suffered by the 10 women of Shiraz whose tragic death touched the lives of many. We see the same spirit, the same choice being made: to stand up for the principles of justice and equality with utmost effort. Though mistreated and imprisoned, today's women—just like those before them—are bravely striving for a just and prosperous Iran.”

In some cases, the executed Bahá'í women were arrested on charges of providing moral education to young children, both girls and boys. Since the 19th century, the Bahá'ís in Iran have promoted gender equality through efforts at every level, including the establishment of schools for girls. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Bahá'ís were particularly



In 2023, the Bahá'í International Community launched Our Story Is One, a global campaign honoring 10 Bahá'í women executed in Iran in 1983

targeted for calling for the full equality of women and men, which allowed women to take part in all aspects of community life and join gatherings where men were present.

“The Bahá’í community in Iran has always called for the full participation of women in all spheres of life in society, including decision-making processes, and has paid a heavy price for it,” Ms. Fahandej added. “Bearing more than 40 years of systematic persecution, which has now sadly been extended to all Iranians, the Bahá’í community has insisted on its right to serve Iran, which it regards as a sacred land, by promoting gender equality, justice and access to education, regardless of the consequences to their lives.”



Nassim Papayianni of Amnesty International urges support for human rights during the Our Story Is One campaign

Following the execution of the 10 women and for the four decades that have followed, hundreds more Bahá'í women have been severely persecuted, facing discrimination both as women and as Bahá'ís. After the Revolution, Bahá'í women serving in prominent social positions in the country were dismissed from their jobs, arrested and imprisoned, tortured, or executed. Those left to live were barred from universities, public employment and virtually all aspects of social life.

In honor of the 10 women of Shiraz and the cause of justice and equality for which they gave their lives, the BIC now invites people around the world, whether as artists, musicians, filmmakers, or in other creative areas, to pay tribute in their name. Contributions can include: songs about the 10 women, short videos about their lives, a memory of the women themselves, graphic arts, written work, social media posts, or public events and memorials, to honor the longstanding struggle and efforts towards gender equality in Iran.

The campaign will start in June and span a year, with its most intensive phase taking place the first three weeks of June, leading to the 40th anniversary of their execution on 18 June.

“More and more Iranians are uniting in a search for social justice, and they have focused on the equality of women and men as one of the most pressing challenges facing the country,” added Ms. Fahandej. “We hope that together we can honor not only the 10 Bahá’í women of Shiraz, but all women across Iran who cherish the principle of the equality of women and men, and who have contributed to building a better future for the country through their perseverance in the face of oppression.”

“Let us stand together, united by our shared experiences of resilience and our collective efforts and sacrifices for Iran, to show that we are inextricably linked regardless of faith and background. We hope that remembering the execution of these 10 women will illuminate and reinforce conversations around justice and gender equality in Iran. Our story is one and we will raise our voices until our shared ideals are realized.”

WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

REDEFINING ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGIES

The media plays an indispensable role in shaping narratives; in its most constructive form, it raises awareness of social realities, ensures transparency, and sheds light on not only consequential developments, but also on hopeful expressions of the human spirit. Yet dominant forms of media, deeply influenced by, for instance, profit or ideological motives, often objectify women or portray them as helpless victims. Digital and other evolving technologies also reproduce these harmful dynamics. The effects often lead to exclusion, harassment, and even repression in the lives of women and girls.

Yet both the media and digital technologies have the potential to extend human capabilities. Bahá'í communities have been learning to draw on this potential and have been redefining assumptions underlying various modes of communication and the role they can play in advancing constructive social change. Across diverse regions, whether in Australia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Panama, Russia, or the United States, Bahá'ís have drawn on the power of the arts, including in media campaigns, theater projects, and musical workshops. In some places they have established radio stations with the aim of exploring concepts such as cohesiveness and service to society, giving voice to marginalized populations, and inspiring hope.

“

... Bahá'u'lláh makes “specific reference to ‘the swiftly appearing newspapers,’ describes them as ‘the mirror of the world’ and as ‘an amazing and potent phenomenon,’ and prescribes to all who are responsible for their production the duty to be sanctified from malice, passion and prejudice, to be just and fair-minded, to be painstaking in their inquiries, and ascertain all the facts in every situation.”

— The Universal House of Justice, world governing body of the Bahá'í Faith.

Values in Innovation: Women's Engagement in Re-Imagining Digital Technologies

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 67th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—22 February 2023

Rapidly shifting global realities have prompted a deeper appreciation of humanity's interconnectedness, and with it a greater reliance on digital technologies. For many women, including those who lack access or the ability to determine how such technologies will impact their communities, this has resulted in greater exclusion and marginalization. Yet even if questions related to access and similar issues were to be resolved, a deeper challenge remains. Many technologies, which should serve as tools to extend human capability and contribute to the construction of a prosperous and cohesive civilization reflective of humanity's highest values, instead reinforce distorted notions about human nature and identity, progress, and purpose. Often guided in their design by a privileged few, many technologies are underpinned by materialistic values and are widely transplanted without considering social, ethical, and spiritual implications. Though every individual is impacted when technology is shaped by harmful worldviews, for women and girls, who comprise a significant base of users and in many instances represent primary target consumers, this represents a profound challenge. As digital tools are increasingly employed across various areas of human endeavor, an honest examination of the values and intentions informing the process of innovation becomes essential. Central to such a pursuit must be the perspectives and contributions women can offer in ensuring that the tools of the modern world, informed by humanity's collective values, help multitudes reach their potential.

* * *

Technology can be a potent instrument in amplifying human capacity and connecting communities. Yet, like any tool, technology, and the spaces it creates, can be deployed in countless ways, yielding benefits or reinforcing existing inequities. On a constructive level, online networks and movements have served as important means of raising awareness about numerous challenges faced by women and girls, while widening the circle of participation in ways previously unimaginable. But when driven by narrow worldviews or a myopic focus on profits, technologies have also been utilized to exclude, harass, exploit, or even repress.

Digital technologies are not value-neutral. Similar to the traditional development paradigm, technological innovation is deeply influenced by materialistic underpinnings. Basic notions about progress often equate the consumption of goods with greater levels of well-being. Various forms of social bias and inequity, as well as views about human nature and progress, driven by narrow profit considerations, are often embedded in the design or application of digital technologies and are thereby promoted to users, for instance, through algorithms designed to



In Mount Druitt, Sydney, Bahá'í youth launch "Manifold," a music initiative expressing their aspirations for unity and positive change in society

maximize screen usage despite scientifically proven addiction concerns. An honest examination of the presumptions and norms underlying the creation and use of such technologies is therefore critical. How can fuller conceptions of human nature, encompassing qualities and attitudes such as trustworthiness, commitment to truth, and a sense of responsibility as the building blocks of a stable world order, increasingly find expression in digital technologies? How can communities be involved in the process of collectively identifying their priorities and consulting on the impacts of technologies within their local context?

Though every individual and community is uniquely impacted by problematic values underlying such tools, the wholesale integration of these values into technologies has had deleterious effects on many women and girls, particularly in the manner in which they are objectified, or enticed to consume an ever-increasing range of material goods in the name of supposed self-improvement. It is precisely because of these experiences, as well as the patriarchal orientation of the culture that exists in decision-making spaces surrounding innovation, that engaging women is critical in better understanding how such technologies can be appropriately and consciously conceived and employed.

* * *

Extending women's participation will ultimately need to be based on recognition that a multiplicity of perspectives is a prerequisite for building a future responsive to the whole range of human experience. Given the obvious representation concerns within a traditionally male-dominated sector, increasing women's engagement in decisions related to the responsible design, use, and distribution of such technologies, as well as in the creation of digital content, must be prioritized. Yet fair representation, far from an end in itself, also serves as a condition that enables dominant patterns of competition and inequality to give way to collaboration, collective inquiry, and a concern for the common good. As in so many areas, the greatest degrees of change will be required from those who have largely benefitted from the prevalent culture.

Beyond shifting the culture in spaces and processes related to technological innovation, women's engagement—indeed widening the horizon of human perspective in processes of inquiry—can contribute to creating new paradigms for guiding the development of technology. Though the capacity to explore ethical considerations associated with digital technologies can be exhibited by anyone, irrespective of sex, the experiences of many women, resulting from the imposition of patriarchal worldviews, position them well to offer specific insights into the development of more complete models, informed by qualities such as moderation, justice, diversity, and a concern for future generations. In doing so, women can help ensure that such qualities more consistently inform the development of technology.

Central to such a pursuit must be the perspectives and contributions women can offer in ensuring that the tools of the modern world, informed by humanity's collective values, help multitudes reach their potential.

As a wider range of qualities come to inform the culture of the technology sector, the potential of the field can be extended further. Far from a barrier stifling innovation and growth, more holistic forms of engagement and inquiry, characterized by a commitment to the principle of gender equality, could unlock forms of innovation more reflective of humanity's collective values.

* * *

At the national level, policies will need to be set in place to ensure a multiplicity of perspectives are incorporated in spaces and processes related to technological innovation. Technology extends human reach; care must therefore be taken to ensure that it extends, not disrupts, the moral order in which human life flourishes. This will naturally involve mechanisms to support the full and meaningful engagement of women. Governments will also need to assume a more proactive role in responding to present threats, such as ensuring women, children, and vulnerable communities are safeguarded against online human rights violations.

Ensuring a diversity of perspectives at the international level will also be indispensable in informing the responsible creation, use, and distribution of technologies, given their inherently global scope and operation. Bringing together the United Nations, governments, the private sector, and civil society, including women actors, to openly analyze the impacts and values informing the development of digital technologies as well as to outline international policies—guided by principles of equality, justice, universality, dignity, trustworthiness, and the search for truth—will be important in this regard. Movement toward the Global Digital Compact suggested by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, ensuring that technological innovation is aligned with shared global values, is one proposal worthy of further exploration. The development of measures of progress to complement gross domestic product in crafting more holistic conceptions of progress, will also assist in examining assumptions embedded in technology design. In this connection, the United Nations has a unique opportunity to establish processes fostering a more healthy model of humanity's technological innovation. Prioritizing and incorporating women's perspectives and promoting their participation to shape the direction of the development of technology will be critical to this end. Exploring mechanisms to enhance the education of women and children through the use of digital technologies, as well as to ensure their full engagement, representation, protection, and well-being online could be revisited periodically in spaces such as this Commission.

* * *

“Extending women’s participation will ultimately need to be based on recognition that a multiplicity of perspectives is a prerequisite for building a future responsive to the whole range of human experience.”

This moment in history presents an opportunity to harmonize technological innovation with humanity's highest wisdom. Traditional notions related to progress and human nature are incapable of responding to fuller conceptions of human well-being and creating a flourishing civilization, including informing and driving the development of digital technologies. Bringing in a wider range of perspectives to interrogate these underlying assumptions will be critical in charting a future that balances material well-being with ethical, social, and spiritual considerations. In this, the voices and perspectives of women, particularly those who have been marginalized by overly materialistic worldviews, will be indispensable, and their meaningful engagement a prerequisite for creating new patterns of culture and understanding around the development of technology. Constructing a more holistic model that speaks to higher conceptions of human nature and progress, and developing tools that can be utilized according to the needs and priorities of specific communities for the betterment of their societies is a vision for technological innovation that presents limitless possibilities.

#OurStoryIsOne attracts unprecedented support with a global reach of hundreds of millions

Geneva—1 August 2023

In an extraordinary global response, the #OurStoryIsOne campaign has, in mere weeks since its launch, attracted unprecedented levels of support with a reach of several hundred million views on traditional and social media. The momentum has been augmented by an outpouring of statements from United Nations officials, high-level dignitaries, government figures, parliamentarians, Nobel Peace Laureates, artists, prominent individuals, members of the public, and even those currently in prison in Iran.

The campaign's theme, steeped in the principle of collective destiny, is giving expression to calls for unity, asking all to see themselves as integral threads in the tapestry of a diverse but single, interconnected group. The powerful message of this year-long campaign is a shared aspiration for essential values and principles, in particular the realization of gender equality and a common vision for a prosperous future.

“Four decades ago, when the Iranian government brutally executed 10 women and girls in Shiraz, Iran, for their belief in the Bahá’í Faith, they thought they were erasing their names from history,” says Simin Fahandej, the Bahá’í International Community Representative to the United Nations in Geneva.

“Little did they know that their ruthless act would instead ignite a movement of unity decades later, making their names known worldwide as global symbols of commitment to the principle of equality, and millions, not only in Iran but around the world coming to see these women’s story as their own. The Our Story Is One campaign is resonating with the deepest aspirations of populations around the world to turn to unity rather than division and to see the interconnectedness of our stories. This sends a strong message to the Iranian government that injustice and shedding innocent blood will not ultimately succeed.”

The Bahá’í International Community (BIC) launched the one-year global #OurStoryisOne campaign on 18 June in honor of the 40th anniversary of the execution of 10 Bahá’í women in Shiraz, Iran who were all hanged on one night for their beliefs. It dedicated the anniversary and the campaign to all Iranian women who, regardless of faith and background, have yearned for gender equality in the country and who continue to face oppression for seeking justice. The campaign called for artistic contributions, public statements, and commemorative events to honor the 10 women as well as all women in Iran.

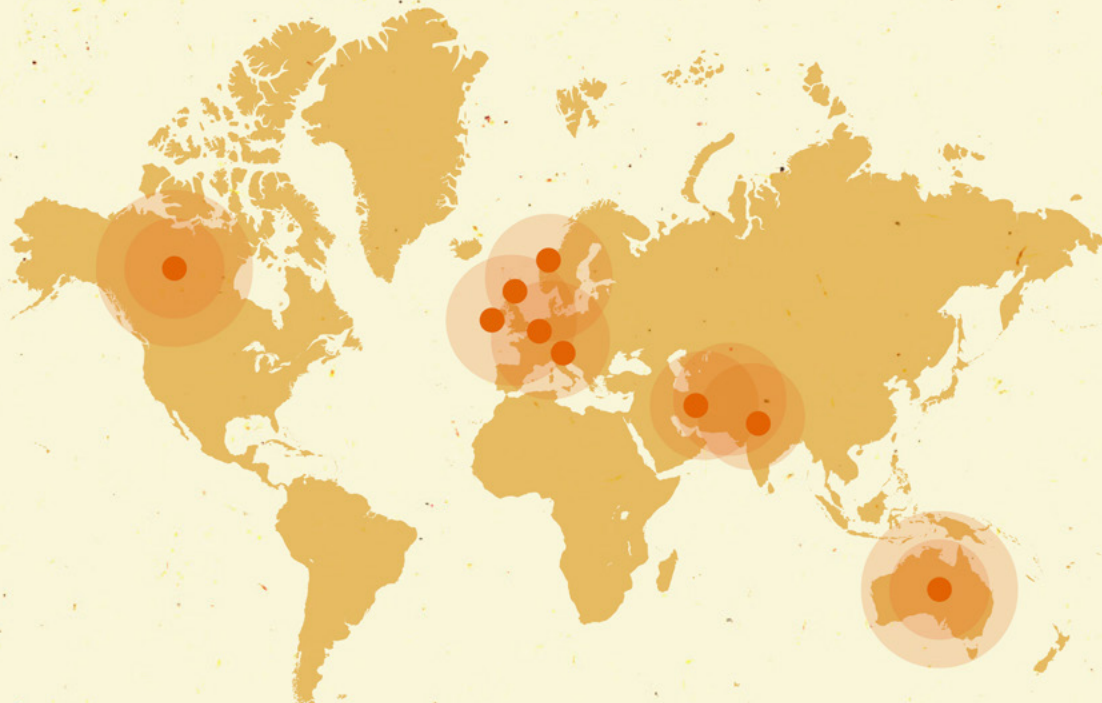
In only a few weeks, Our Story Is One has already received thousands of works of art paintings, drawings, songs, poems, graphics, videos, illustrations, sculptures, stained glass art, theater performances, and other forms of artistic endeavors. Contributions continue to pour in and are published daily on the campaign’s Instagram page.

#OURSTORYISONE CAMPAIGN

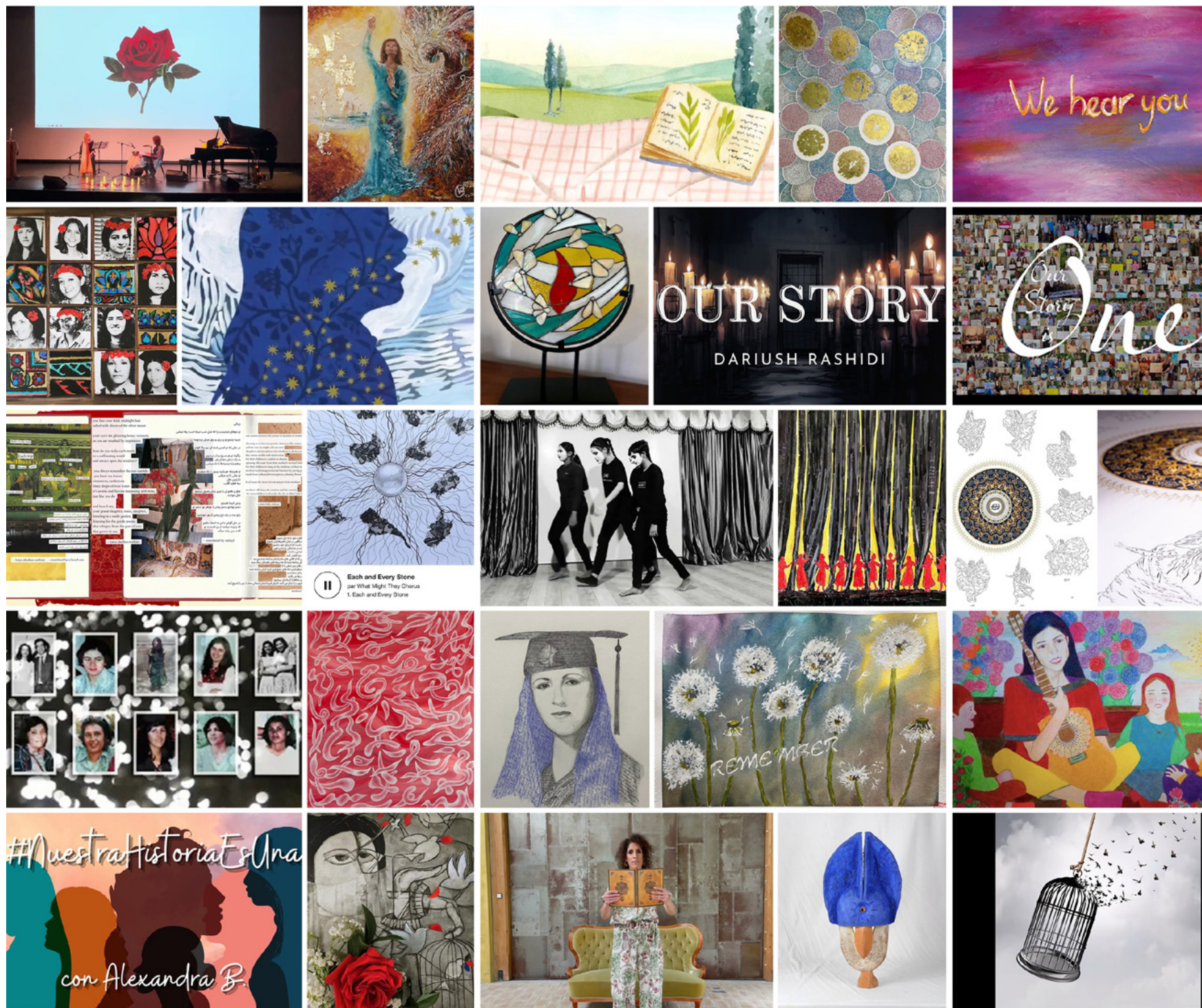
HAS REACHED

250 MILLION VIEWS

TRENDED IN 9 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES



Our Story Is One, launched in 2023 by the Bahá'í International Community to mark the 1983 execution of Iranian Bahá'í women, reached over 250 million people in its first two months



People from around the world contributed thousands of pieces of artwork to the 2023 Our Story Is One campaign

A global Twitter storm held on 18 June trended in Iran as well as eight other countries across four continents, in Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. A glittering array of prominent personalities also gave their support, including government officials, parliamentarians, UN officials, activists, journalists, artists, and human rights leaders around the world. The Twitter storm, together with other web and social media platforms reached some 250 million views in more than 33 languages.

Traditional media—television and print media—also significantly amplified the exposure of the campaign worldwide. Persian-language television, digital and satellite radio channels broadcast more than 65 TV programmes and radio reports—some with English subtitles—including documentaries, interviews, and discussion programmes. This is in addition to a multitude of articles published by Persian print media outlets.

Beyond the Persian language media, television and print media agencies across the world carried articles and interviews in many different languages, further enhancing the reach and impact of the campaign. The estimated reach of the campaign through traditional media is estimated at several hundred million. To this number is added the thousands of people attending commemorative gatherings of the event and exposure to the campaign through local media and channels.

Thousands of public statements of support have poured in from influential figures from around the world. A group of women Nobel Prize Laureates lent their voices to the campaign by issuing a joint statement, stating that the sacrifices of the 10 “have inspired a new generation of women who refuse to be silenced and are willing to endure great hardships to live in a more prosperous and just Iran. The story of the resilience of Iranian women in the face of persecution is a shared one, transcending boundaries of faith and background.”

The highlights of the campaign included a worldwide wave of events and commemorations in honor of the 10 and all women in Iran; an outpouring of artistic contributions from individuals around the world; public statements from notable figures; and media coverage and documentaries produced specially for the anniversary and the campaign.

WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

HARMONIZING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEOPLES, AND WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

Bahá'í communities are learning, together with friends, neighbors, and co-workers, how qualities such as unity, collaboration, and mutual assistance are among some of the greatest resources available in addressing climate and environmental challenges. Many women, who are often predominantly involved in livelihoods such as subsistence farming that rely on the stability of fragile ecosystems, are disproportionately impacted by the imbalances in humanity's relationship with the natural world. At the same time, many women are leading efforts in climate activism and advocating for sustainable policies.

Within Bahá'í communities, patterns of community life and institutional arrangements that prioritize equality and cohesion have supported societies devastated by floods and earthquakes, and have paved the way for rehabilitation and risk-reduction measures. These communities have been harmonizing conceptions of societal progress with the environment through ecological awareness and conservation campaigns, tree-planting and recycling initiatives, as well as river restoration projects. Bahá'ís have also collaborated with fellow community members as well as government institutions to establish regenerative agriculture plots, restore native forests, and designate protected areas to replenish marine life and revitalize fish stocks, all while fostering an appreciation for the interconnectedness between present and future generations.



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This span of earth is but one homeland and one habitation. It behooveth you to abandon vainglory which causeth alienation and to set your hearts on whatever will ensure harmony.

— Bahá'í holy writings

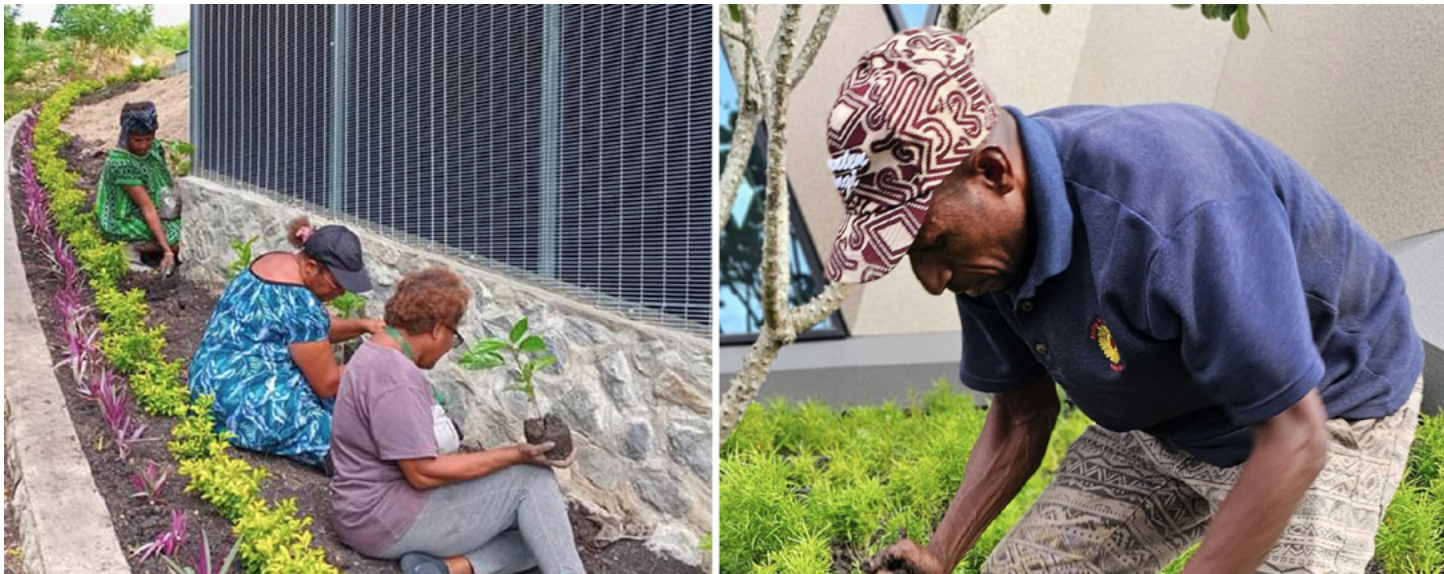
Rising Together: Building the Capacity to Recover from Within

Excerpt from a Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey

Istanbul—17 May 2016

Community-building capacities in times of disaster

Though such efforts are not focused on response or recovery per se, the abilities they strengthen and patterns of behavior they foster have a profound impact in times of natural disaster. The capacity to organize large numbers into coordinated action provides one clear example. As community building efforts grow to the point where hundreds of inhabitants are supporting the participation of thousands of their fellow residents, increasingly sophisticated systems of support and communication emerge to manage the growing complexity. Such structures greatly enhance a community's ability to undertake large-scale response and reconstruction efforts. Organizational skills such as the ability to maintain basic statistics, to plan based on resources, and to operate in a mode of learning—characterized by regular and ongoing reflection on efforts undertaken, results seen, and adjustments needed—similarly allow efforts to expand as needed in scale and scope. And experience collaborating with institutions of government—which arises naturally as community-building efforts exert growing influence in an area—can be invaluable in deploying external resources efficiently and effectively.



In Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, residents from nearby communities help plant native trees and diverse vegetation on the Bahá'í temple site



In 2019, young adolescents in Okcheay, Cambodia planted trees along a village road to improve air quality and provide shade

Fostering cooperation and a sense of shared endeavor across a diverse populace is another crucial capacity that is developed. As effort is made to welcome increasing numbers into thoughtful discussion on the direction of their collective development, decision-making processes become more consultative and participatory. Perspectives of young and old, women and men, and backgrounds of all kinds are sought out and taken into account, which in turn attracts others to participate. And as such dynamics advance in a locality, leaders are enabled to better analyze specific problems, attain deeper understanding of complex issues, and evaluate courses of action with clarity and impartiality. The aspirations and ideas of local inhabitants are continually considered and consciously incorporated into plans and projects. And as unity of thought and action grows over time, the community strengthens its capacity to draw on shared resources in times of need.

“ ... communities where people worship together in a variety of settings, make a habit of visiting one another in their homes, and regularly engage in conversations of significance are far better equipped to remain hopeful, to see meaning, and to persevere and recover when disasters occur. ”

Around the world, individuals are also working to strengthen the devotional character of their communities. Reaching out to neighbors of all backgrounds, they are creating, in the intimate setting of the home, spaces for shared worship, exploration of the deeper meaning of life, and purposeful discussion of issues of common concern. Such explicitly spiritual objectives might seem tangential to traditional humanitarian concerns. Yet in times of natural disaster, people the world over grapple with existential questions at the most fundamental levels. And communities where people worship together in a variety of settings, make a habit of visiting one another in their homes, and regularly engage in conversations of significance are far better equipped to remain hopeful, to see meaning, and to persevere and recover when disasters occur. Communities in which social ties are strong and spiritual roots run deep are more resilient in the face of disaster.

The Heart of Resilience: The Climate Crisis as a Catalyst for a Culture of Equality

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 66th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—12 February 2022

In a world where the impending risks of climate change press daily, a twofold reality presents itself—while women are disproportionately affected by climate change, they are uniquely situated to lead efforts in response. In the wake of climate-induced disaster, livelihoods directly dependent on stable and healthy ecosystems—often largely pursued by women—are upended. Many lose access to land, shelter, as well as financial support or recourse. Vulnerabilities deepen where societies already fall short of realizing the full potentialities of women. Yet, women are not simply victims. Their insights form the range of human experience and enable the construction of a fuller picture of reality. Often connected to large networks, women are an integral element of communal flourishing, community-based solutions, and mobilization. Whether as leaders in economic thinking, policymakers, climate activists, smallholder farmers, or through a multitude of other capacities, women worldwide are making significant contributions related to climate action, natural resource management, food security, and scientific innovation toward sustainable solutions. Young and old alike, the experiences of women offer profound insight into safeguarding humankind's home, the present generation, and those still to come. Ensuring the potential of women is fully harnessed will require action on at least two fronts: increasing women's presence in leadership roles and creating conditions for women to engage more meaningfully in community life.

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Amidst mounting climate risks, it is becoming clearer how much humanity benefits when women's leadership is embraced and promoted at every level of society, whether in the family, community, local government, corporation, or nation. Qualities of leadership typically associated with the masculine—assertiveness and competitiveness, for example—have proven limited when not tempered by those typically associated with the feminine, such as an inclination toward collaboration and inclusion, and a disposition toward care and selflessness. The tendency to prioritize longer-term interests, to consider the well-being of future generations, and to explore the human impact of policies more broadly

are increasingly acknowledged as necessary tools in formulating environmentally conscious programs and strategies for building more resilient communities. Of course, these attributes can be manifested by leaders irrespective of sex. Yet, by increasing women's participation in leadership roles, these qualities more consistently inform the culture of leadership and characterize practical strategies.



In Spain, youth engaged in Bahá'í community-building activities lead recovery efforts and strengthen local resilience in the face of flooding

Creating opportunities for women's participation at various levels of governance as well as in diverse community roles would prove critical in ensuring their experiences increasingly inform decisions of import. Yet, for meaningful engagement to fully find expression, a commitment to the principle of gender equality will need to be intentionally woven into the processes of governance themselves, and institutional systems will need to be reconfigured to give rise to just relationships. Possibilities will need to be ensured for women's active involvement in shaping decision-making spaces. Recognition that a multiplicity of perspectives is a prerequisite for effective investigation into the challenges of



In Honduras, Bahá'í emergency volunteers provide protective gear and supplies to communities affected by storms and the pandemic

society will need to characterize every deliberative setting. This would form part of the work of transforming spaces historically dominated by men into inclusive environments where all feel empowered to engage, and where men, motivated by a spirit of understanding, learn to genuinely consult and act in concert with women. As each comes to be valued for their distinct contributions to the collective, foundations of trust, so critical to the resilience of any community, can crystallize among individuals, but also in institutions that are committed to the well-being of all. Establishing more mature relationships within systems of governance, then, becomes both a process and outcome in developing policies capable of responding to the impacts of climate change.

For there to be lasting transformation, a whole-of-society dedication to gender equality and a commitment to building a public life shaped by women and men in dynamic partnership in every facet of life will need to take root. At the global level, international policies—guided by principles of justice, equity, and dignity—will be indispensable in setting the stage for a culture of equality, as will be the creation of global institutions tasked with systematizing insights gained through local experience. The work of advancing gender equality must, then, also proceed in the local context as much as the international. In Dili, Timor-Leste, for instance, efforts to weave a unified pattern of community life six months prior to a devastating cyclone contributed to the community's resilience. "In that short time we've learned much about how to serve together as one. Every day we act and reflect, and then plan for the next day," a member of that community noted. This collaborative mode, shifting away from preconceived notions of progress, helped develop the skills and networks needed to form relief structures capable of distributing food and other essentials. Without expectation for remuneration, they supported more than 7,000 people across 13 villages and neighborhoods when access to external assistance had been cut off. In Okcheay, Cambodia, youth engaging in moral and spiritual programs empowering them

to serve society collectively devised a local tree-planting project, which subsequently protected a section of their roads from soil erosion with the onset of severe floods a year later. These efforts, though simple, offer glimpses into ways in which cultivating inclusive and cohesive communities can contribute not only to the will to endure and survive, but also to live in the highest sense of the word.

The community, a building block of the global arena, can provide a space where alternative, inclusive, and cooperative ways of life can find expression, where men wholeheartedly come to see women as equal partners, and all are empowered to develop leadership abilities. Built from the ground up, new patterns of community life become situated within a larger global enterprise as communities learning to apply the principle of gender equality in all circumstances, for the betterment of all, contribute to a growing body of knowledge at the international level. Such a process can take a variety of forms. For its part, the worldwide Bahá'í community, together with other collaborators, has been learning about the application of spiritual principles to the life of the community in breaking down prejudicial barriers to women's participation. Through moral educational programs, attitudes of unity and fellowship are instilled from a young age so that participants come to view each other as valued allies working for the well-being of their communities. Central to this process is the concept of capacity-building—of enhancing the ability of participants to better understand the material, social, and spiritual realities of their societies and to devise next steps as they collectively chart their own path of progress, deriving fulfillment through service. Toward this end, spaces have organically emerged for individuals to reflect together on their challenges, identify constructive responses, and explore deeper questions related to the meaning of life. These spaces can serve as arenas where hope in times of difficulty finds expression, and bonds of solidarity can strengthen. The above-mentioned examples demonstrate that the capacities, attitudes, and qualities characterizing a community can reinforce its resilience in the face of extreme events or ongoing environmental burdens.

The United Nations is uniquely positioned to demonstrate what such a culture of equality could look like at the international level, through, for instance, creating open deliberative spaces among its agencies, harmonizing its diverse processes related to gender equality and inclusivity, and learning how its internal structure could increasingly reflect these principles. The UN will also no doubt prove critical in shaping international policy frameworks and encouraging funding in support of initiatives that foster a greater appreciation for the imperative of gender equality. And it could facilitate the sharing of knowledge created by actors at each level. In this regard, important considerations such as how institutional and societal arrangements can be reconfigured to enable women's meaningful participation, as well as how cohesive societies can be forged even before the onset of catastrophe, could be revisited periodically in international spaces such as this Commission.

The world's condition is pointing to the universal truth that humanity's collective experiences are shared and that effective responses require the full spectrum of perspectives to be represented at every level of governance. Examples are beginning to emerge where more mature expressions of community life and institutional arrangements have enabled women to lead as effective protagonists in the face of local hardships and global disasters. It is precisely in times of turbulence where profound opportunities exist to redefine collective values and the assumptions that underlie them. The challenges posed by climate change should serve as catalysts to embrace new approaches to inclusive forms of governance as well as just patterns of community life capable of unlocking the whole range of human experience.



THE GIRL CHILD

CREATING SAFE SPACES THAT FOSTER THE TALENTS AND CAPACITIES OF GIRLS

In the Bahá'í view, children are the most precious treasure a community can possess. Attitudes developed in childhood and through adolescence impact the character of future societies. While the crucial work of nurturing rising generations is a shared responsibility irrespective of sex, mothers, who are often the first educators of children, have a defining influence.

Ensuring that girls are equipped with the skills and qualities that will allow them to contribute to societal flourishing through a range of potential endeavors, as well as to cultivate the healthy character of future generations is, therefore, of paramount importance. This is all the more pressing as young girls are still marginalized in countless settings, and all too often their rights are violated.

Bahá'í communities are committed to cultivating safe environments where girls can develop the talents and qualities that can help them flourish individually and in the life of society. Such initiatives include educational programs that foster, from early childhood, qualities and capacities such as unity, an acute sense of justice, and a concern for the well-being of their communities, as well as tutorial programs, scholarship funds, and schools that specifically provide robust education and mentorship opportunities to young girls.



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There can be no improvement unless the girls are brought up in schools and centres of learning, unless they are taught the sciences and other branches of knowledge, and unless they acquire the manifold arts, as necessary, and are divinely trained.

— Bahá'í holy writings

Empowering Girls

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 42nd Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—3 March 1998

The Bahá'í International Community was particularly pleased that the girl child was identified in the Beijing Platform for Action as a critical area of concern. Bahá'ís have long been active in efforts to address the developmental needs of girls so that they will be able, as women, to contribute fully to the advancement of civilization. Indeed, the Bahá'í Writings promise that “*when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, when they enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics war will cease.*”¹ It is, therefore, highly appropriate that the 42nd Commission on the Status of Women should focus attention on the challenge of creating an enabling environment for empowering girls.

***... the rights of all family members must be safeguarded,
children must be taught to respect themselves and others,
and the unity and solidarity for the family must be
nurtured.***

As the Commission consults about actions that might be taken by governments and NGOs to create an environment that will enable girls to develop their capacities and will empower them to participate fully in the affairs of the world, we offer the following suggestions for consideration.

- The girl child's first and most influential environment is her family. She learns from her immediate and extended family who she is and how she fits into the world. If the family environment is to empower girls, sons and daughters must be equally valued and loved, the rights of all family members must be safeguarded, children must be taught to respect themselves and others, and the unity and solidarity for the family must be nurtured.

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pages 134-135.

- Girls must be educated. *“Women’s lack of progress and proficiency,”* the Bahá’í Writings assert, *“has been due to her need of equal education and opportunity. Had she been allowed this equality, there is no doubt she would be the counterpart of man in ability and capacity.”*² So important is the education of girls, that if a lack of resources forces a choice, parents are advised to consider giving first priority to the education of their daughters. Girls must be prepared not only to participate fully in the affairs of the world, but also to fulfill their responsibilities as mothers and first educators of the next generation.



A Bahá’í children’s class in Norte del Cauca, Colombia nurtures spiritual growth and a sense of community among young participants

² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, page 182.



A Bahá'í children's class in London, United Kingdom fosters moral education and unity among young participants in a diverse urban setting

- Boys must be raised with an understanding of the equality of women and men and be prepared to work together with women as equal partners in all fields of human endeavor. Failure to educate boys for equality will have devastating consequences not only for girls, but also for society as a whole. As long as the oppression of women is tolerated, men will continue to harbor harmful attitudes and habits that they carry from the family to the workplace, to political life and ultimately to international relations. Because the attitude of superiority, fostered in men by erroneous beliefs, is often unconscious, programs should be instituted to sensitize males, both boys and men, to the ways in which they may unknowingly discourage girls and block their progress.³

3 In brief, the assumption of superiority by man will continue to be depressing to the ambition of woman, as if her attainment to equality was creationally impossible; woman's aspiration toward advancement will be checked by it, and she will gradually become hopeless. On the contrary, we must declare that her capacity is equal, even greater than man's. This will inspire her with hope and ambition, and her susceptibilities for advancement will continually increase. She must not be told and taught that she is weaker and inferior in capacity and qualification. If a pupil is told that his intelligence is less than his fellow pupils, it is a very great drawback and handicap to his progress. He must be encouraged to advance by the statement, "You are most capable, and if you endeavor, you will attain the highest degree." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 76-77 (Women #109).

- Likewise, law enforcement officials, judges and other custodians of society who are responsible for the rights of women and children will need to be sensitized to the ways in which women are oppressed and deprived of opportunity.
- The negative influence of the media has been widely discussed. Its positive potential, however, has gone largely untapped. The media should be reminded of their responsibility to encourage positive social values in boys and girls and to improve the ways in which women are portrayed. They could promote the ideas that girls are deserving of equal rights, that society's progress depends on the full participation of women, that girls are as capable as boys, and that women are a powerful force for peace.

“ As long as the oppression of women is tolerated, men will continue to harbor harmful attitudes and habits that they carry from the family to the workplace, to political life and ultimately to international relations. ”

- No attempt to set human affairs aright can ignore religion. Although most religions have, in their early years, improved the lot of women, it must be acknowledged that religion has also been used as an excuse to oppress them. Religious leaders and people of faith everywhere have a special responsibility to reaffirm those eternal spiritual principles that unite the hearts and release the capacities of every soul. For example, the admonition that we should treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated can be found in the teachings of every religion. Were this principle to guide all interactions, including those between men and women, girls and boys, many harmful traditional beliefs and practices would gradually be relinquished.
- Governments can, through their policies, support the efforts of individuals, families, teachers, law enforcement officials, the media, and religious leaders to create an environment that encourages women and girls to develop their capacities and to step forward into new arenas of service.

In conclusion, the Bahá'í International Community stands ready to do its share to help create an enabling environment for empowering girls. For, in the Bahá'í view, *“The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes the equal to the world of men ... can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be.”*⁴

⁴ Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 227, p. 302 (Women #16).

Transforming Values to Empower the Girl Child

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 51st Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—26 February 2007

Declaration

The Bahá'í International Community welcomes the consideration of “the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child” as the priority theme of the 51st session of the Commission on the Status of Women.



Students from the Starfish Bahá'í International school in The Gambia



A Bahá'í-inspired organization in Canada conducts collaborative action research to help youth build capacities to pursue their highest aspirations

We also welcome the Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children, which we hope will bring attention to this critical issue and facilitate strategizing at all levels of society.

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Education and training must be carried out in a way that enables children to grow intellectually and morally, cultivating in them a sense of dignity as well as responsibility for the well-being of their family, their community, and the world.

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The Bahá'í International Community believes that the era of developing legal frameworks to eradicate violence against girls must now be followed by an emphasis on implementation and prevention. The challenge before the international community is how to create the social, material, and structural conditions in which women and girls can develop their full potential. The creation of such conditions must not be limited to legal and institutional reforms; rather, deep-rooted changes are needed to create a culture in which justice and equality prevail over the impetuosity of

authoritarian power and physical force. Education and training must be carried out in a way that enables children to grow intellectually and morally, cultivating in them a sense of dignity as well as responsibility for the well-being of their family, their community, and the world.

We would like to offer the following recommendations:

With the understanding that a girl child's most influential environment is her family, national and international interventions, policies and programs should promote values and attitudes that support families and enable women and men to work together as equal partners in all fields of human endeavor.

- Educational institutions should develop and incorporate moral development into their curricula. Through such curricula, Bahá'í schools, for example, seek to develop the individual as a whole—integrating the spiritual and the material, the theoretical and the practical and the sense of individual progress with service to the common good. Gender sensitization should also form an integral part of a child's education, with a view to stemming the perpetuation of discrimination and stereotypical gender roles.



World Peace Academy, a Bahá'í-inspired school in Morang, Nepal, promotes academic excellence and moral development in a nurturing environment

- Consultative mechanisms for coordination, implementation, and monitoring at the national level are needed to reinforce the understanding of civil society's and governments' responsibility for the effective implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Bahá'í International Community and its affiliates in 182 countries, are striving to set a worldwide example of families which not only reject violence against the girl child, but also strive to provide a supportive and nurturing environment in which girls and women are valued and respected as equal partners.

THE ROLE OF MEN AND BOYS

MEN AND BOYS AS CO-CREATORS OF A GENDER-EQUAL WORLD

“As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.” This statement from the Bahá’í writings highlights the reality that realizing humanity’s full potential depends on the harmonious partnership between women and men—much as organs in a body must support one another to ensure its survival and flourishing.

Yet, patriarchal norms restrict women’s opportunities, which in turn limits men. Not only are men denied the opportunity to express the whole range of their humanity—as qualities such as compassion, care, or mutual support are often relegated to the realm of “the feminine”—but societal progress is stifled as entire populations are cut off from the ability to contribute fully to its advancement. Bahá’í communities are working to address this imbalance by bringing men and women together in joint initiatives that enable them to define a shared vision for their future societies and to work as equal partners in translating that vision into reality.

Through a participatory process of study that promotes discussion and reflection around essential qualities such as unity and justice, participants are afforded, from as early as childhood, the opportunity to cultivate a fuller appreciation for the inherent dignity of every individual, irrespective of sex. As this process is embraced by local populations, a new culture of equality, mutual respect, and trustworthiness is emerging in many communities, where women and men value diversity of experience as a vital element of social transformation. In some instances, men are consciously sharing roles traditionally held by women, enabling women the opportunity to serve their societies and participate in decision-making spaces.



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As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.

— Bahá'í holy writings

The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 48th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

New York—1 March 2004

The 1995 Beijing Platform of Action underlined the indispensability of the contribution of men and boys to achieving gender equality. Recent years have witnessed considerable advances in women's attainment of political and civil rights, but the implementation of full gender equality requires a profound shift in individual values, outlook and conduct, which will ultimately transform the underlying ethos of social institutions, making them more welcoming to women.



In Vancouver, Canada, a group performs music as part of their exploration of spiritual empowerment in a junior youth group



A class at Ruhi Arbab School, a Bahá'í-inspired school in Jamundí-Robles, Colombia, blends academic learning with moral and spiritual education

The teachings of the Bahá'í Faith offer a model of gender equality based on the concept of partnership between the sexes and the active support of men and boys for the achievement of equality. Three basic elements underpin the Bahá'í approach:

- Bahá'ís are committed to an evolutionary social transformation of fundamental values, even in regions of the world where cultural traditions impose obstacles to women's development. Enduring change comes through cooperative activity of men and women rather than through confrontation. Hence, we call upon all members of society to encourage and support women to develop their full potential and to strive for their equality and human rights and we recognize that much more can be accomplished in the long run if men and women work together. Within the family, therefore, boys and girls alike are taught respect for all females and within the Bahá'í community, programs are conducted to educate men and boys concerning the status of women, and a variety of practical measures are instituted to foster their involvement in promoting gender equality as a shared community goal.
- The full development of men and boys is inextricably linked to the advancement of women. A society characterized by gender equality serves the interests of both sexes. It enables men and women to develop in a more balanced and multifaceted way and to discard the rigid role stereotypes so crucial to shifting family

dynamics, and to accord women full access to the world of work. It also enables both sexes to recognize each others' needs, building an awareness vital to the resolution of issues associated with women's health. It also enables the replacement of unequal relationships and tendencies toward domination and aggression with genuine partnerships between the sexes characterized by collaboration and the sharing of resources and decision making.

Recent years have witnessed considerable advances in women's attainment of political and civil rights, but the implementation of full gender equality requires a profound shift in individual values, outlook and conduct, which will ultimately transform the underlying ethos of social institutions, making them more welcoming to women.

- Bahá'ís view the advancement of women as an ongoing organic process aligned with forces of social transformation and the movement towards the recognition of the oneness of humanity. We recommend making a start, however modest, by educating boys from the earliest stage of their social development in initiatives along the lines of those outlined above, and by engaging the support of men in this process, in order to foster a more conscious awareness that the interests of men and boys are linked to those of women.
- In light of the experience and contribution of the Bahá'í community in 182 countries towards the implementation of these principles, Bahá'ís remain optimistic about the achievement of gender equality and the progressive involvement of men and boys in achieving this goal.

Perspective | Gender equal partnership: CSW as an institutional learning model

By Liliane Nkunzimana

New York—18 April 2024



Initially intended to open this piece with the sentence “Where are the men at CSW”?—in capital letters!—because the cause of gender equality is not the concern or responsibility of women alone. Men are also harmed by gendered dynamics of hierarchy, power, and competition. Men also have a stake and a vital role to play in building a gender-equal world. Such a world will only emerge as all members of society are increasingly working shoulder to shoulder to achieve that reality.



Bahá'í delegates attend International Women's Day, in the General Assembly hall, during the 2023 UN Commission on the Status of Women

As I discussed this idea further, with both male and female colleagues, I became interested in a more nuanced question. What enables movement in this direction? Of the men that do attend the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), what motivates them? What sustains them? What facilitates their participation?

The priority theme of this year's Commission is timely in this regard because it highlights an often-overlooked facet advancing gender equality: the role of the institutions of society.

Our world is losing trust in institutions and often overemphasizes the individual. Articulating the role of institutions as social actors in their own right can therefore be challenging. But CSW itself, if approached in a thoughtful way, can be seen as an arena where we can collectively explore how institutional structures might create space for men as well as women to address gender divides together.

During past Commissions, I have observed that male participants tend to see CSW as a women-first or women-only space. Men at CSW listen more than participate. They want to avoid stepping on the toes of established women actors. They hesitate to speak unless they have been invited, and even then offer careful and constrained words that they are sure will be well-received.

These are the very kinds of challenges that women face in countless other spaces, of course. And it is indisputable that men are overrepresented in numerous processes and fora, particularly at senior levels. CSW provides an important venue for foregrounding new approaches to organization and decision making, drawing from the deep reservoirs of female leadership and feminist thought around the world.

And yet we must not repurpose destructive forms of hierarchy or oppressive conceptions of power by simply swapping women for men within them. Every individual, irrespective of gender, is negatively impacted by the norms designed to benefit a handful, whether unhealthy gender expectations, unjust and violent interactions, or any other. The ultimate goal is to deconstruct gender norms that harm and hold back men and women alike—and institutions have a unique role to play in advancing this work.

What might this look like at CSW? Perhaps by reflecting in practice the reality that the quality of leadership exhibited by those serving in institutions depends more on the necessary qualities an individual brings to the role—from generosity, compassion, and service, to determination, courage, and strength—than the individual's gender. Perhaps by allowing common commitment to the cause of gender equality to transcend loyalty to any one department, program, agency, or funding source. Perhaps by ensuring that internal institutional processes reflect essential moral and ethical convictions: that women and men have always been equal in capacity and potential, for example, or that the welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole.

As a relative newcomer to the gender equality space, I am immensely grateful to the work of those who have paved the way for the current and future generations of well-wishers of humanity. I think we owe it to the countless powerful women who have come before us to creatively imagine a gender-equal world co-created by all. As I join those who have dedicated their lives to this important principle, I look forward to a transformed CSW that invites the efforts of men ready to work shoulder to shoulder with women in a shared endeavor, with full support of our societal institutions.

* * *

This piece is a personal reflection of Liliane Nkuzimana is a Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

Perspective | Gender inequality: What men lose

By Daniel Perell

New York—21 February 2025



When something sad—or happy—happens in my house, I am the one who is most likely to cry. My wife and daughters look at me in these moments and we share a knowing smile. I am grateful that my parents equipped me with the self-assurance to cry in public and the capacity to laugh about it with my family. It has helped shape my understanding of a different kind of masculinity.

The discourse around gender equality focuses on the myriad forms of discrimination women face, and the various ways this hamstrings humanity's progress. As it should. But I also often find myself considering what humanity is losing when men inherit harmful understandings of masculinity.

“Advancing the human family is an effort that requires all of us—regardless of outward characteristics.”

I recall a tragic story shared at an event I attended at last year's Commission on the Status of Women about a woman who filed a restraining order against her husband. Before the order was issued, however, the husband took their daughter for a hike, during which he took both their lives.

The room was silent with shock and sadness, vibrating with fury at the father. Yet only a few of the responses noted the tragedy represented by the perversion of the father himself—that a human being might become so degraded as to commit such a heinous act.

What path led a man, who was once a child like any other, to such a bankrupt and despicable end? What forces and circumstances in society allowed him to think that such an act was his best or only option?

Women bear the overwhelming share of gender inequality's abuses, affronts, and injuries. They suffer predominantly at the hands of men, whether silently or violently. Addressing these problems requires an assessment of the circumstances surrounding aggressors as much as victims. The kind of change we expect and need can only come about as we allow ourselves to openly discuss the harms men experience at the hands of gender inequality.

Many of the changes necessary to build a gender-equal world will need to be made by men. It is men who will need to stop turning to violence as an option to solve problems. It is, largely, men whose behavior will need to change to make way for true equality. At the United Nations, it is predominantly men who will need to vote for a female Secretary-



Bahá'í delegates outside the the General Assembly hall, during the 2023 UN Commission on the Status of Women

General. How we expect men to make these changes is a vital question that we need to discuss—all the more so because it is so sensitive.

At the heart of the matter is a simple question: what is the equality we are working towards? It cannot be a world where women are encouraged to strive to be more like the most aggressive or dominating of their male counterparts, where the answer to patriarchy is everyone taking on characteristics of patriarchal norms. There is a shift necessary in the vision we have of humanity's future.

What kinds of fathers might men become, if they were permitted to express their full range of human emotion, without being called names suggesting they are weak for doing so? What leadership qualities might they express? How much closer might we be to a world without war?

By characterizing gender equality as a “women's issue,” burden is placed upon women and space for men's contributions is narrowed. Those men who engage in the discussion are often lauded or chastised, thanked or accused—but only infrequently are they treated like any other participant in the dialogue. In a sense, men are tokenized in this space just as women are in others. And that cannot be the way to solve a problem in any space.

As we engage at the Commission on the Status of Women this year, I hope that while we consider the various ways women and girls suffer from gender inequality, we can also find ways for men to understand the benefits they would realize in a more equal world. Advancing the human family is an effort that requires all of us—regardless of outward characteristics. We suffer together. Or we can rise together.

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This piece is a personal reflection of Daniel Perell is a Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN FAITH AND FEMINISM

FAITH ACTORS AND FEMINISTS COMMIT TO ADVANCING A GENDER-EQUAL WORLD

Advancing gender equality requires universal participation. Faith actors and feminists—indeed every well-wisher of the cause of justice and equality—have an indispensable shared role to play in addressing the many injustices that prevent women and girls from developing their full potential and playing their rightful role in the betterment of society. Religion has always had a profound influence on culture and community, yet its name has often been invoked to advance personal and ideological ambition, assigning an inferior status to women and girls and obscuring their full participation in society.

Advancing gender equality therefore requires not only dismantling patriarchal norms, but also actively engaging shapers of culture and belief. For their part, Bahá'í communities, together with like-minded collaborators including feminists, are challenging patriarchal attitudes, power dynamics, and biases that perpetuate gender-based discrimination. Through a wide range of community-building activities—inspired and guided by Bahá'í teachings—spaces are being created for diverse members of societies to reflect together on the implications of spiritual principles such as humanity's interconnectedness, as well as the equality of women and men, and to constructively challenge prejudicial patterns of thought and action.

By employing unifying methods of social transformation, discernible shifts at the level of culture are gradually taking root. Numerous accounts are emerging of previously opposing groups, now walking shoulder to shoulder in pursuit of a shared vision. In many instances, community-led initiatives, embraced by women and men alike, have organically unfolded to address the inequality experienced by women and girls in society.



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Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very important element.

— Bahá'í holy writings

The Role of Religion in Promoting the Advancement of Women

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, distributed officially to all participants

Beijing—13 September 1995

A bold and courageous plan for the advancement of both men and women, the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women stands on solid ground. It sets out an Agenda for Equality which stresses women's rights as human rights, emphasizes shared responsibility and partnership between women and men, and calls for immediate action to create a peaceful, developed, and just world, based on the principle of equality and built on the strength of women's knowledge, energy, creativity, and skills. Thus the Platform for Action addresses the advancement of women from the standpoint of moral principle, as distinct from pure pragmatism.

The Bahá'í International Community is encouraged by and applauds this principled approach, but we feel it must go much farther. If the Platform for Action is to win the worldwide support it requires for successful implementation, the principle on which it is founded, the equality of men and women, needs to be understood as an essential aspect of



Delegates gather for the Fourth World Conference on Women, held from 4–15 September 1995 in Beijing



Delegates from around the world attend the Fourth World Conference on Women, held from 4–15 September 1995 in Beijing, China

an even broader principle: the oneness of humanity. Properly understood in the context of the oneness of humanity, equality of the sexes must be embraced not only as a requirement of justice but as a prerequisite for peace and prosperity. Nothing short of a compelling vision of peace, and commitment to the values on which it must be based, will have the power to motivate the revolutionary changes in individual behavior, organizational structures, and interpersonal dynamics called for by the Platform for Action.



The Bahá'í delegation offers a quiet space for reflection at the NGO Forum in Huairou during the 1995 Fourth UN World Conference on Women

Traditionally, religion has been one of the most powerful sources of both vision and values. Every religion, particularly in its early stages, has evoked a new vision for society, articulated values consonant with that vision, and inspired both personal and institutional transformation. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that religion has also been a source of division and social fragmentation. Indeed, the record of religions in promoting the advancement of women has been uneven. While, typically, in the early years of their existence, religions have tended to encourage the participation of women, historical evidence suggests a gradual tendency among religious institutions over time to establish practices and support attitudes that impede the development of women's potential.

“ Properly understood in the context of the oneness of humanity, equality of the sexes must be embraced not only as a requirement of justice but as a prerequisite for peace and prosperity. ”



Delegates from around the world attend the Fourth World Conference on Women, held from 4–15 September 1995 in Beijing, China

Because religion is such a potentially powerful force for progress, religious leaders and people of faith everywhere are urged to step forward as lovers of humanity to promote those eternal, unifying principles—or spiritual values—that can inspire in both individuals and governments the will to implement the Agenda for Equality.

Foremost is the principle of the oneness of humankind. It lies at the heart of the exhortation that we should treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated, an ethical standard upheld in some form by every religion. To establish justice, peace, and order in an interdependent world, this principle must guide all interactions, including those between men and women.



The Bahá'í delegation offers a quiet space for reflection at the NGO Forum in Huairou during the 1995 Fourth UN World Conference on Women

If the treatment of women were scrutinized in the light of this ethical standard, we would doubtless move beyond many traditional, religious, and cultural practices.

The personal transformation required for true equality will undoubtedly be difficult for men and women alike. Both must relinquish all attachment to guilt and blame and courageously assume responsibility for their own part in transforming the societies in which they live. Men must use their influence, particularly in the civil, political, and religious institutions they control, to promote the systematic inclusion of women, not out of condescension or presumed self-sacrifice but out of the belief that the contributions of women are required for society to progress. Women, for their part, must become educated and step forward into all arenas of human activity, contributing their particular qualities, skills, and experience to the social, economic, and political equation. Women and men together will ensure the establishment of world peace and sustainable development of the planet.

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Religious leaders and people of faith everywhere have a special responsibility to reaffirm those eternal spiritual principles that unite and bind together the hearts and release the capacities of every soul. Galvanized by the spirit and vision of the oneness of the human family, women and men together can, in the spirit of the Agenda for Equality, create a peaceful, just, and prosperous world in which to nurture the generations to come.

Toward a New Discourse on Religion and Gender Equality

A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 59th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and on the 20th Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women

New York—1 February 2015

As Member States gather to review the progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and to address gender equality in the post-2015 development agenda, the time has come for a serious conversation about the role of religion in advancing the equality of women and men. Religion as a basis for social and political mobilization is a reality that must be openly examined. The continuing importance of religion in people's lives and identities can no longer be ignored. If it is to play a constructive role in society, the very concept of religion, as well as its nature and purpose needs to be reexamined. We must be ready to discard labels that have locked us in adversarial debates such as “secular vs. religious,” “modern vs. traditional,” “liberal vs. conservative,” “Western vs. non-Western.” The role of religion in human life and the equality of women and men are realities too complex to be reduced to such comparisons. A new discourse is needed—one suited to the needs of the age in which we live. The Bahá'í International Community wishes to stimulate and to contribute to such a discourse.

At the outset, we wish to state clearly our belief that the equality of men and women is a facet of human reality and not just a condition to be achieved for the common good. That which makes human beings human—their inherent dignity and nobility—is neither male nor female. The search for meaning, for purpose, for community; the capacity to love, to create, to persevere, has no gender. Such an assertion has profound implications for the organization of every aspect of human society.

We see religion not as a set of dogmas, or conflicting denominations. Rather, we posit that religion is an ongoing process through which humanity becomes conscious of the spiritual dimension of human life and learns to orient its individual and collective life accordingly. At the core of religion is a set of spiritual principles, which, together, form the common heritage of humankind. At each stage of human history and development—and no less today in the midst of an emerging global community—religion acquires new meanings, significance, functions, and expressions. Today, as the insights of women are increasingly recognized as essential to the creation of healthy families, more peaceful communities, more vibrant intellectual life, and more effective governance, it is their voices in particular that must inform the discourse on the nature of religion and its role in contemporary life.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its progeny of human rights instruments have provided the international community with a normative framework, which recognizes the inherent dignity of the individual and elaborates the rights and responsibilities upon which a peaceful society can be built. The most challenging task for governments and communities alike has been the translation of these norms into a lived reality for the peoples of the world. Legal

standards and social science affirm the equality of all human beings, however it is the deep-seated beliefs about the nature of women and men and the relationship between them that have proven to be the most formidable obstacles to the realization of an equitable social order. Twenty years after the (then) largest gathering of Heads of State and civil society brought gender equality to the top of the global agenda, discrimination against women remains the most widespread injustice in the world today.

“*That which makes human beings human—their inherent dignity and nobility—is neither male nor female. The search for meaning, for purpose, for community; the capacity to love, to create, to persevere, has no gender.*”

It is well documented that throughout history, much of humanity has looked to religions and their leaders for guidance and continues to do so today. While many thought that modernity would diminish the influence of religion—a seeming victory of the “rational mind” over “irrational” beliefs—this has not come to pass. Religion is reasserting itself in myriad ways. In the name of religion has been raised the call to service to the common weal; to embracing a common humanity that transcends divisions of nations and race; to stewardship for the environment; to forgiveness and reconciliation.



A Bahá'í children's class in Austin, United States, nurtures spiritual growth and moral development in a joyful group setting



The Bahá'í International Community delegation gathers during the 2025 UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York

The role of religion as a shaper of culture and community life has been increasingly acknowledged by the UN. Having recognized the ability of faith-based organizations to reach and provide human and material resources in underserved regions, a number of UN agencies have sought to partner with these organizations in pursuit of common goals. Several hundred religious NGOs have been granted Consultative Status with the UN's Economic and Social Council and are active contributors to discussions at the UN.

“ ... religion is an ongoing process through which humanity becomes conscious of the spiritual dimension of human life and learns to orient its individual and collective life accordingly ”

At the same time, religion has fallen prey to ignorance and blind ambition. In its name, fanaticism and violence are promoted. Interpretations of religious doctrines as assigning an inferior status to women and girls have given rise to patriarchal systems and structures, which continue to obstruct women's full participation in society. The international community finds itself severely challenged by the intransigence of societies who continue to obstruct the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and flagrantly violate the human rights of women based on interpretations of religious law. In some countries, for example, marital

rape remains outside of the law; a man's honor is a viable defense for murdering a female member of his family; no minimum age requirement for marriage exists. In other countries, women have no right to divorce or to inherit; their education is considered optional or unnecessary; they are not present in public spaces and governing structures. While still prevalent, the incidence of such examples is in decline. Progress can be seen in the increased participation of women in public life and community affairs; it can be discerned in the significant efforts of many countries to effect change through strategies focused on the education of women and girls.

At this stage in the collective life of humanity, we wish to draw the Commission's attention to three areas of endeavor, which we feel are critical to addressing the present-day situation of women and girls.

1. *Responsibility of religious leaders.* Religious leaders have a pivotal role to play in addressing the profound injustices that prevent women and girls from developing their potential and playing their rightful role in the advancement of society. If they are to be worthy partners in the construction of a more just and peaceful society, religious leaders must unhesitatingly raise their voices against the violation of human rights, against all forms of violence and fanaticism, and against the denial of equality perpetrated in the name of religion. They must examine the ways in which their words, their actions, or their silence have enabled the status quo. They must account for the ways in which their guidance and example may be stifling the exercise of those intellectual faculties that distinguish humankind. Governments have a role to play in encouraging reflection on these issues.
2. *The role of men and boys.* The equality of women and men is not a condition whose effects will be limited to half of the world's population. Its operationalization will revolutionize all facets of human society—the generation of knowledge and development of intellectual life, the practice of governance, the allocation of material resources and the condition of the family, to name but a few. Men must come to realize that under current conditions of inequality, the development of their full potential is not possible. It is they who must find the moral courage to convey and model new understandings of masculinity and who must challenge and question the narrow roles that society and the media have assigned to them. In the final analysis, it is not enough to create space in the current social order for women to play their rightful role. Rather, the goal is for women and men to work shoulder to shoulder, each as the helpmate of the other—in the context of family, work, community, and international affairs—to construct a society which allows for the flourishing of all.
3. *Discrimination against women based on interpretations of religion.* We urge the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to formulate a comment, which addresses discrimination against women based on interpretations of religion, noting that it constitutes a major obstacle to the overarching goal of peace.

The achievement of gender equality will require financial, moral, and intellectual resources on a scale not yet seen. It will involve the efforts of the masses of humanity, the insights of religion as well as science, the fearless commitment of men alongside women, unprecedented collaboration at all levels of governance, and an understanding that the advancement of women is the advancement of all. The Bahá'í International Community invites all those working towards the betterment of humanity to join us in a dialogue about the issues raised in this statement. It is our hope that in this way we will learn and better understand each other's perspectives and collectively advance our efforts towards the realization of a social order which supports the flourishing of all.

Perspective | Women, faith, and human rights

By Bani Dugal

New York—22 October 2017



When we consider the relationship between women, faith, and human rights, our minds may consider a variety of tensions and challenging questions. For instance: How do we honestly acknowledge and assess the ways in which religious communities have throughout history wielded their sacred scriptures and spiritual teachings towards divergent ends, at times to empower women and at times to subjugate them? How do we reconcile the role of faith and religion in contributing to processes of social transformation, and, specifically, to guaranteeing and preserving the fundamental human rights of women in a global community seemingly divided by the mounting tides of an aggressive, secular materialism, on the one extreme, and a resurgence in global violence carried out in the name of religion, on the other?

The wide range of competing conceptions of what constitutes religion contribute to the challenge in understanding its relationship to issues of social justice and human rights. Is religion a fixed and unchanging set of texts, doctrines, and practices which define relationships between people (including women and men), to whose literal interpretation humanity must mould itself into conformity? Or, is it a collection of norms and practices, limited in their universal applicability, that we can draw on where, when, and to whatever extent we find useful?

“ *... while we may be able to identify some of the obstacles stymieing gender equality in our current paradigm, we have to learn our way toward a new paradigm where gender equality is the norm.* ”

The Bahá'í community has found it helpful to conceive of religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice, analogous to and complementary with science, aimed at contributing to the advancement of civilization. In this context, a religious community becomes a community of practice, engaged in a systematic process of learning as it strives to apply lofty and ennobling spiritual principles to create new patterns of social life.

We must acknowledge that none of us—no group, no individual, no country, no leader—actually knows what a society that is truly based on the principles of gender equality looks like. Such a society has never existed. Therefore, while we may be able to identify some of the obstacles stymieing gender equality in our current paradigm, we have to learn our way toward a new paradigm where gender equality is the norm. The path forward may not be entirely clear, but a path forward is urgently needed.



Speaking at a 2024 event on Our Story is One, Christian F. Nunes, Simin Fahandej of the Bahá'í International Community, and Azza Karam

The great enterprise of ensuring human rights for all people, and of bringing about gender equality, in this light, can be understood as an urgently-needed learning process. In order to develop a new body of knowledge, we need to draw on humanity's great systems of knowledge: religion and science. While there is much to share about each, I would like to offer some thoughts on religion in particular.

Religion reaches to the very roots of human motivation, allowing us to move beyond bare facts and observable phenomena, and helping us find meaning in the universe. Religion helps us translate initial excitement and enthusiasm for various causes and programs into sustained, long-term commitment to action. After all, the process of collective transformation needed to achieve gender equality is arduous indeed.

Religion elevates our vision of human nature and human character. We are not just an amalgam of cells and bones, tissue and sinew, that somehow have the emergent power of a higher consciousness. Religion enables us to understand that human beings are noble, they have dignity, and they are entitled to certain inalienable rights to safeguard their high

station. Despite the secondary identities that are used to categorize us according to race, gender, religious affiliation, social status, and so forth, our more fundamental identity as human beings must recast all of our relationships in the light of oneness. This spiritual unity impresses upon us that our well-being is bound up in our neighbours', no matter their gender, religion, or political association.

In order for religion to function alongside science as a system of knowledge and practice, we also need to develop scientific qualities and capacities of dispassionate inquiry and learning. Given that we have to learn what true equality looks like in practice, we need to ask questions and formulate hypotheses. We need to observe, study, and rigorously test ideas we think will lead to the empowerment of women and girls. These ideas must be measured against the standard of key principles like justice, kindness, trustworthiness, and nobility. These efforts must unfold in a pattern of consultation, action, and reflection so that observations and insights into effective practices can be better understood and continually improved. In this sense, then, religion should not be used to excuse the ossifying of antiquated ideals; it should serve as a dynamic knowledge system that provides much of the impetus for progress and advancement.

“ Religious leaders and practitioners, governments and policy-makers, do have pivotal roles to play in addressing the profound injustices that prevent women and girls from developing their full potential and playing their rightful role in the advancement of society. ”

Religious leaders and practitioners, governments and policy-makers, do have pivotal roles to play in addressing the profound injustices that prevent women and girls from developing their full potential and playing their rightful role in the advancement of society. Normative frameworks, legal standards, and the social sciences have unequivocally affirmed the equality of all human beings. Yet it is the beliefs and practices about the roles and capacities of women of all ages, and the prevailing patterns of unequal relationships among boys and girls, men and women, that continue to be the most formidable obstacles to transformative and lasting change at local, national, and international levels. Such change will require, among other things, the systematic dismantling of social structures and practices that perpetuate inequality and the marginalization and oppression of women and girls.

The knowledge of how to create a just society cannot become the province of select segments of humanity. The principle of oneness, with its attendant implications around justice and universal participation, means that human rights for all cannot be secured by a small pocket of the population. Every human being has a moral responsibility to contribute to the storehouses of humanity's collective knowledge, especially regarding the eradication of inequality and injustice.

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This piece is a personal reflection of Bani Dugal who is the Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.

The equality of women and men: Divine imperative for an age of transition

Excerpt from a Keynote Address by Bani Dugal, Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, at the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions

New York—22 October 2017

Progress in every age depends on a deep understanding of the realities of that particular period. “Every age hath its own problem,” Bahá'u'lláh declared, going on to counsel the people of the world that “the remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require.” The equality of women and men is a truth that has existed since the dawn of time. But consciousness of it has been limited throughout the long ages of humanity’s childhood and adolescence. In the past, women were often regarded as an inferior breed, denied the opportunity to express their innate potential, and relegated to the role of serving the needs of men. Such attitudes continue in countless societies, of course. And yet, in the final analysis, they have not been able to withstand the test of time. As understanding of the limitless potentialities of the human spirit has advanced, those who would assert male supremacy through word or deed find no moral or ethical grounds from which to do so. And lacking that, they find themselves compelled to appeal to the basest inclinations of self-interest, greed, and fear.

“ *The equality of women and men is a truth that has existed since the dawn of time.* ”



Bani Dugal, Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, at the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions, Toronto, Canada

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... ultimately, the realization of gender equality requires universal participation. It necessitates the proactive involvement of every segment of every population, working shoulder to shoulder, in full partnership.

— The Bahá'í International Community

Front and back cover art & design — Michele Ostovar.

Bahá'í International Community

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