

# BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

*United Nations Office*

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## **Approaching Men to Improve Lives for Women**

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In Garoua Boulai, a rural region of eastern Cameroon, a group of men are talking about child care: How can we relieve some of the women's burdens? What if we hired someone to watch the children while the women work in the field? How many children are there in the community?

Such a discussion would have been unimaginable at one time. The men of Garoua Boulai had never thought about child care, let alone taking any responsibility for it. As a result of community consultations arranged through the UNIFEM-funded Baha'i International Community project "Traditional Media as Change Agent" which started in 1991, awareness about the status of women has been raised.

The men and women participating in the project were each asked to list their daily work responsibilities on poster-size sheets of paper attached to the wall. Upon seeing the dauntingly long list of women's activities, the men's first response was denial. "We men must have forgotten something on our list," they said, and even tried to create tasks for themselves. But finally they recognized that their women were indeed overburdened. To build a nursery was a community decision, taken in response to what both women and men saw as a community problem.

The seed for this innovative project came from a statement by the Baha'i International Community to the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1988. The NGO suggested that "a primary target for communication related to development projects for women may well be men." The idea and the proposed use of traditional communication media such as song, folk drama and puppetry sparked UNIFEM's interest. The resultant UNIFEM-funded project is now in its second year in three countries: Cameroon, Bolivia and Malaysia.

A story from Bolivia illustrates how traditional media are being used to explore and change attitudes. One Quechua-speaking community looked at how their indigenous folk tales and mythologies have influenced their attitudes towards women. The participants saw that, as in many traditions, some of their stories and myths promoted a view of women as less intelligent and weaker than men. So the community decided to compose and perform songs based on the Quechua tradition that would promote women's intelligence and resourcefulness.

As the project comes to a close, its managers are considering the production of a video and training manual to share the techniques and strategies that have been developed.

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