

BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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Equality of Men & Women: A New Reality

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Over a century ago, and for the first time in the history of revealed religion, Bahá'u'lláh, Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, proclaimed the equality of man and woman. He did not leave this pronouncement as an ideal or pious hope but wove it, as a basic factor, into the fabric of His social order. He supported it by laws requiring the same standard of education for women as for men, and equality of rights in society.

Equality of the sexes is, for Baha'is, a spiritual and moral standard essential for the unification of the planet and the unfoldment of world order. Without the qualities, talents, and skills of both women and men, full economic and social development of the planet becomes impossible. For

The world of humanity is possessed of two wings — the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realized; humanity cannot wing its way to heights of real attainment.¹

In the present transition of humanity from adolescence to maturity, signs of this evolving equality can be observed everywhere. In the Baha'i view this is hardly surprising, for *"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."*

The character of this unique age we are entering is further brought into focus in the following statement from the Baha'i Writings:

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 scales are 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 properly balanced.

Unity and Equality in the Family

The Baha'i world community has, for more than one hundred years, accepted as truth the principle of equality of the sexes and has understood the importance of implementing this standard in individual, family, and community life. The institution of marriage, the basis of the family in the Baha'i community, is part of this process. Before a Baha'i marriage can take place the couple, who have freely chosen each other, must obtain the consents of all parents and transmit them to the community's governing body. The couple then weds in an atmosphere of loving parental approval and acceptance by the community. With the exchange of vows, in which each partner repeats, *"We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God,"* the newly wedded begin their lives together on a basis of true spiritual unity and equality.

This unity and equality, rooted in the rights and responsibilities of every person before God, unfolds in the family. Here, values and

attitudes essential for the development of the individual, the community, the nation, and humanity must be taught from early life. In the Baha'i view

the family being a human unit must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed.... All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. 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.

Equality in Education and Training

Although both parents share in the overall responsibility of educating the children, the mother is given recognition as the first educator of humanity, and she must be carefully prepared for this task. Her education, in fact, from the Baha'i point of view,

is more necessary and important than that of man, for woman is the trainer of the child from its infancy. If she be defective and imperfect herself the child will necessarily be deficient; therefore imperfection of woman implies a condition of imperfection in all mankind, for it is the mother who rears, nurtures and guides the growth of the child.

Since Baha'is do not separate life into religious and secular compartments, and since faith must be expressed in social action, education for men and women, in all its facts, *"holds an important place in the new order of things."* For this reason, the education

of each child is compulsory. If there is not money enough in a family to educate both the girl and the boy the money must be dedicated to the girl's education, for she is the potential mother. If there are no parents the community must educate the child. In addition to this widespread education each child must be taught a profession, art, or trade, so that every member of the community will be enabled to earn his own livelihood.

It is also significant that, in the spirit of this new era of human evolution, Bahá'u'lláh has *"promulgated the adoption of the same course of education for man and woman,"* making clear that *"daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes."*

Contribution of Women to Peace

The Baha'i Writings promise that *"the entrance of women into all human departments is an irrefutable and incontrovertible question. No soul can retard or prevent it";* that in *"no movement"* will women *"be left behind; that they "will attain in all such a degree as will be considered the very highest station of the world of humanity and will take part in all affairs";* that *"when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world...war will cease."* This contribution of women to the establishment of world unity and peace will inevitably be recognized and developed.

In past ages humanity has been defective and inefficient because incomplete. War and its ravages have blighted the world. The education of woman will be a mighty step toward its abolition and ending for she will use her whole influence against war.... In truth she will be the greatest factor in establishing Universal Peace and international arbitration. Assuredly woman will abolish warfare among mankind.

An Equal Voice

A great responsibility is, however, placed on woman to develop her potentialities fully.

She must make every effort

to attain greater perfection, to be man's equal in every respect, to make progress in all in which she has been backward, so that man will be compelled to acknowledge her equality of capacity and attainment.

Certainly the well-being of mankind depends on the development of the potential virtues and abilities of every individual, regardless of race, nationality, class, religion, or sex. For this reason prejudices, which cause division and oppression, are systematically abolished in Baha'i community life. A unique administrative system, rooted in the concept of unity in diversity, both insists on education for all members of the community and allows for the immediate assimilation of all those who in the past have been deprived of their rights. The Baha'i electoral system, operating by secret ballot, with no nominations or electioneering, encourages universal participation: every adult Baha'i is eligible for election to local and national administrative bodies responsible for decision in the conduct of Baha'i affairs. The ease with which women, long deprived of equal opportunities, can now be integrated into the life of society, is vividly evidenced by the participation of women in all areas of Baha'i community life.

Today, in the Baha'i world community, in over 200 nations and territories, women are joining with men in building a global society. Their full contribution toward the establishment of a world civilization is possible, Baha'is believe, because of the all-pervasive spiritual power released in this age by Bahá'u'lláh, Who has erased all limitations preventing the fulfillment of human potentialities. For in the Baha'i view, since

this is the century of light, it is evident that the Sun of Reality, the Word has revealed itself to all humankind. One of the potentialities hidden in the realm of humanity was the capability or capacity of womanhood. Through the effulgent rays of divine illumination, the capacity of woman has become so awakened and manifest in this age that equality of man and woman is an established fact.

Notes

1. All quotations are from the Baha'i Writings.

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