

BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

United Nations Office

Women and Men: Partnership for a Healthy Planet

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"The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established." These prophetic words, uttered by Bahá'u'lláh during the closing decades of the nineteenth century were all but ignored by the leaders of that day. However, in the closing decade of the twentieth century, humanity has become increasingly aware of its interdependence and is convinced at last that no individual, institution or nation can live in total isolation from the whole. The environment/development crisis has caused many to rethink their view of the world and begin to look at the earth as a single organic, interdependent and unified system. Consequently, the search for balance between the needs of society and the limited resources of the natural world is taking place within the larger context of the search for balance, peace, and harmony within society itself.

The intimate link between the unity of the human race and equality of the sexes is explained in the Baha'i- Writings: *". . . woman must be given the privilege of equal education with man and full right to his prerogatives. That is to say, there must be no difference in the education of male and female in order that womankind may develop equal capacity and importance with man in the social and economic equation. Then the world will attain unity and harmony. In past ages humanity has been defective and inefficient because it has been 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. Woman rears the child and educates the youth to maturity. She will refuse to give her sons for sacrifice upon the field of battle. In truth, she will be the greatest factor in establishing universal peace and international arbitration. Assuredly, woman will abolish warfare among mankind."*

To date, most systems of social organization have marginalized women. Overall, modern development strategies have tended to reinforce and, at times, exacerbate conditions of inequality. To address inequality of the sexes, the United Nations launched the land-mark "United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace (1975-1985)." As a result of research undertaken during the Decade, the vital contributions of women to the social and economic life of their nations became more visible. The new research also highlighted the unnecessary burdens borne by women and the obstacles preventing their full participation in society. More significantly, the Decade brought women together and provided them with unprecedented opportunities to exchange views and experiences. Women found that their shared concerns for their own future and for that of the human family enabled them to transcend national, class, and racial boundaries. In addition, the Decade catalyzed the revitalization of traditional women's organizations and the creation of new grass-roots Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) addressing specific needs of women. These NGOs have facilitated an extensive networking among women, empowering them to articulate their needs, design their own programs, and begin affecting policy-making at all levels. As a result of efforts undertaken during the Decade, development planners have begun to address women's lack of access to resources such as education, technology, and credit. United Nations agencies, national governments, and international development agencies have established divisions to address the needs and concerns of women.

These are significant achievements which must be greatly strengthened and expanded. Despite some progress, however, women remain on the fringes of policy making, and the systems which have traditionally oppressed them remain largely intact. These systems adhere to the pattern of domination that has characterized society for thousands of years: men have dominated women; one racial or ethnic group has dominated another; and nation has dominated nation. Notwithstanding humanity's reluctance to change, *"the balance is already shifting"* - according to the Baha'i- Writings, *"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."*

While women must develop their capacities and step forward to play an active role in solving the world's problems, the impact of

their actions will be limited without the full cooperation of men. Women working together in unity and harmony have already achieved a great deal within the spheres of influence open to them. Now women must come together with men as equal partners. When men lend their full support to this process, welcoming women into all fields of human endeavor, valuing their contributions, and encouraging their participation, men and women together will help create the moral and psychological climate in which peace can emerge and an environmentally sustainable civilization can advance and flourish. The transformation required for true equality will undoubtedly be difficult for both men and women because both must re-evaluate what is familiar, what is routine. Blame must be relinquished because no individual can be faulted for having been shaped by historical, sociological forces. Guilt must be shed in favor of responsibility for growth. In the face of the profound challenges facing humanity, all are accountable for recognizing that the old model no longer works, and all will be answerable to future generations for their stewardship of human civilization and its relationship to the earth.

Change, however, is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one's self and others, loving education, and the passage of time. The transition will be eased when men realize that they will be unable to achieve their full potential as long as women are prevented from attaining theirs. Indeed, when men actively promote the principle of equality, women will no longer have to struggle for their rights. Gradually, both women and men will discard long-held unhealthy attitudes and progressively incorporate into their lives the values conducive to true unity.

In the opinion of the Baha'i- International Community, the emerging world civilization will be sustained by a common commitment to a new set of values, a shared understanding of the balance between rights and responsibilities, and the willingness on the part of each to serve the best interests of humanity as a whole. For Baha'i-s, the commitment to the emancipation of women is not a recent development nor is equality of the sexes a vague ideal. It is our conviction that the unification of the human race depends on the establishment of the equality of men and women. Humanity, the Baha'i- Writings explain, having passed through the stages of infancy, childhood, and turbulent adolescence, is now approaching maturity, a stage that will witness *"the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world - a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life."*

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