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Summary

Khan presents the core concepts of the Bahá'í Faith—the religious dimension, the attainment of peace, and collaborative decision-making—and situates women within each of them. She emphasizes the importance allocated to education by the Bahá'í Faith, while maintaining that these principles uphold the basic dignity of women and provide for their equality with men in all religious, social, economic, and political spheres of life. She also presents various examples where the principles are applied in different contexts around the world.

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IN THE RESEARCH

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WOMEN, SOCIAL ACTION, AND THE COMMON GOOD

THE PROMOTION OF PEACE FROM A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE

The writings of the Founders of the Bahá'í Faith disclose a positive and inspiring vision of the future. They clearly mandate and support the involvement of women as social actors in promoting the common good and give special emphasis to the unique role of women in laying the foundations of universal peace. The teachings of the religion stress the inevitability of world peace—a peace based on the practice of moral and spiritual values and on the recognition of the oneness of the human family; a peace that embodies the emancipation and full partnership of women and men, that signals the unity and maturity of the human race; a peace that can be hastened by means of active and conscious choices by individuals to support its emergence.

In this paper I will present a number of core ideas from the Bahá'í Faith (ideas that provide mandates for women as they arise to fulfill their functions as social actors in pursuit of the common good. I will describe, in some detail, the implication of these ideas for practice, and the Bahá'í approach to supporting and encouraging the contribution of women to the promotion of peace.

Core Concepts from the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í teachings can be considered appropriately from a historical perspective that encompasses the coming of Messengers, or Manifestations of God, at periodic intervals in various parts of the world over the span of thousands of years. It is a tenet of Bahá'í belief that each of these

Manifestations of God reveals divine teachings that include a reiteration of eternal spiritual principles and an application of these principles to the needs and opportunities of the social milieu in which the Manifestation appears. Their teachings thus provide the inspiration and values for the advance of civilization, and progressively move humanity forward toward a promised time of world unity, the

emancipation of all peoples, and the attainment of universal peace. The Founder of the Bahá'í Faith is regarded by its adherents as not only the latest in this sequence, but the one coming at this time of fulfillment.

For the purposes of this discussion, three core ideas will be examined: the role of religion in defining views about women's place in society, the emancipation of women as a prerequisite to peace, and the contribution of collaborative decision-making to forging partnerships for peace.

The Religious Dimension

The great religions of the world have traditionally been important sources of vision and values, and primary agents of socialization. The spiritual principles and values they inculcate not only form the basis of a unifying world view but also serve to motivate individuals and social institutions to act on these principles and to use them as a standard against which to weigh their practical actions.

It is a cardinal element of Bahá'í that all Manifestations of God have taught that there is no spiritual distinction between women and men. The Bahá'í writings explain that as follows:

...women are accounted the same as men, and God hath created all humankind in His own image, and after His own likeness. That is, men and women alike are the revealers of His names and attributes, and from the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between them. Whosoever draweth nearer to God, that one is the most favored, whether man or woman. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1997, section 38.3)

While the various traditions uphold the spiritual equality of women and men, the history of the role of religion in promoting the advancement of women discloses a most uneven record. Spiritual equality of the sexes, as set out in

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the authentic teachings of the Founders of the religions, is not always matched by the expression of social equality in the rights and functions assigned to women in the life of the community. While in the early years of their existence religions tended to encourage the advancement and participation of women, at later times, when the vision presented by these Founders has become obscured, women have been actively held back and oppressed by religion, especially when the forces of extremism prevail.

The Bahá'í Faith affirms, as an integral element of its teachings, not only that the equality of women and men must be regarded as a spiritual reality, but that this equality must now be expressed in both individual and social practice. As a spiritual principle, the equality of men and women has relevance to humankind as a whole. The practice of this principle is a spiritual duty for all Bahá'ís, women and men alike. Indeed, the promulgation and implementation of the principle of the equality of the sexes throughout the world is one of the primary aims of the Bahá'í Faith. This objective can best be perceived as a fundamental element of the Bahá'í endeavor, in all parts of the planet, to foster adherence to justice as an enduring foundation for the unity, peace, and well being of the earth and its peoples.

The Attainment of Peace

Women's full and equal participation in the life of society is a prerequisite to world peace. In the Bahá'í view, the expression of the equality of men and women is a vital and indispensable component in the spiritual and social evolution of humanity. According to the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith:

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... Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavor will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge. (Universal House of Justice 1985, 26-27)

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The Bahá'í writings mandate that women be accorded equality of opportunity in education and employment, that they be given the right to vote and to participate in government, and that they experience equality in all departments of life. To deprive women arbitrarily of these rights and privileges is considered to be both immoral and unjust; it has a detrimental effect on the individual woman's sense of self and her peace of mind, perpetuates attitudes of dominance and superiority in men, and undermines the "moral and psychological climate" of society. (Universal House of Justice 1985, 26-27)

Not only do the Bahá'í writings underline the relationship between equality and peace, but they also stress the important role of the family as the environment in which attitudes are acquired—attitudes that can be either harmful or conducive to peace. 'Abdu'l-Bahá sees the family as a microcosm of the family of nations. He calls attention to the impact of the psychological climate of the family and the effects of the behavior of individual members on the peace and security of the whole. Highlighting the challenge confronting each individual and each family in choosing attitudes and actions that promote unity and peace, 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers the following observation:

Consider the harmful effect of discord and dissension in a family; then reflect upon the favors and blessings, which descend upon that family when unity exists among its various members. What incalculable benefits and blessings would descend upon the great human family if unity and brotherhood were established! ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 230)

An entirely new model of family is provided by the Bahá'í teachings. It rests on the principles of the equality of the sexes, flexibility of roles, and respect for the rights of all members of the social unit. It provides a setting in which all family members can develop attitudes and patterns of behavior that are conducive to a peaceful and harmonious society. The preservation of the rights and prerogatives of the individual family members ensures that respect is accorded to all, irrespective of sex or age. The Bahá'í family is

characterized by a collaborative approach to decision-making, encourages an appreciation for the unique contribution that each can make to the family, and fosters individual development, collaboration, mutual support, and an equitable sharing of tasks and resources.

Collaborative Decision-Making

Bahá'í consultation, a process of collaborative decision-making and peaceful conflict resolution, is a vehicle for putting into practice the attitudes and values associated with peace and justice. It is distinguished by the spirit of inquiry into what is best for all concerned rather than by a desire to prove oneself right or an aim to pressure the group to accept one's view. The participants are urged not to be possessive of their own ideas, but to offer their views with an attitude of detachment, presenting them as a contribution to the group as it strives to reach its conclusions. Decisions are made in the light of spiritual principles. They reflect the group's understanding of the truth of the matter under discussion and its efforts to arrive at a solution that is equitable and just. Such decisions are willingly supported not only by all those involved but also by the community as a whole.

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Essential to the consultative process is its atmosphere, and the freedom that each participant has to express his or her views without fear of being belittled, humiliated, insulted, or ignored. The ingredients of such an atmosphere are the acceptance of the oneness of humankind and the equality of the sexes, and recognition of the importance of courtesy and respect in all manner of human relations.

When applied within the family setting, consultation represents another significant element of the Bahá'í model of family life. Consultation within the family is used not only as a means of making decisions but also as a process for the thorough exploration of issues and the attainment of unity of vision. The consultative decision-making of husband and wife, carried out in a spirit of equality, is far removed from the adversarial approach and patriarchal tone that so often characterize family decision-making.

Family consultation plays a vital role in building and maintaining family unity and in training children to develop good judgment and the capability to examine complex issues fully and dispassionately. Children who are taught the skill of consultation recognize that individuals may be different but equal. They learn to be more concerned with the good of all and less motivated by self-interest, to solve problems and make decisions without recourse to

violence or threat. They also understand the importance and wisdom of support of a decision once it is made. These lessons are very relevant to the individual's future participation in decision-making in government and in the realm of international relations. All too often in such settings, even after decisions are finally made, these conclusions tend not to be supported either by all of those who participated in the decision-making or by those on whose lives the decisions impinge.

Application of Bahá'í Principles

The Bahá'í writings present specific practical provisions for promoting the equality of women and men, for fostering the development of full partnership, and for enhancing women's capacity to serve as social agents for the common good. For purposes of our discussion, I will describe the application of the Bahá'í teachings concerning the education of girls and women, the Bahá'í perspective on the station of motherhood, and the involvement of women in the professions and their participation in religious life and social administration.

Education of Girls and Women

The emancipation of women and the achievement of full equality demand the recognition that women and men alike are endowed with talents and abilities. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "...it is well established that mankind and womankind as parts of composite humanity are coequal and that no difference in estimate is allowable, for all are human" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 133). The achievement of equality requires that women have the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities by obtaining education and participating in all fields of human endeavor.

Great emphasis is placed on education in the Bahá'í Faith as a means of promoting the advancement of women. The Bahá'í writings affirm that many of the differences apparent between women and men, the differing functions assigned to them, and the inequities that persist, are due to the fact that women have been deprived of education and the opportunity to develop those skills that would enable them to participate fully in society. Commenting on the situation of women, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

...if woman be fully educated and granted her rights, she will attain the capacity for wonderful accomplishments and prove herself the equal of man. She is the coadjutor of man, his complement and helpmeet. Both are human; both are endowed with potentialities of intelligence and embody the virtues of humanity. In all human powers and functions they are partners and coequals. At present in spheres of human activity woman does not manifest her natal prerogatives, owing to lack of education and opportunity. Without doubt education will establish her equality with men. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 136-37)

The Bahá'í Faith not only upholds the principle of universal education, but it accords priority to the education of girls and women. Going beyond statements that access to education is vital for the development of women so that they can play an equal part in society, the writings specify that, under certain circumstances, preference is to be given to the education of girls. Calling attention to the responsibility of parents to educate all their children, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly states that the training and culture of daughters is more necessary than that of sons, for girls will one day be mothers, and mothers are the first educators of each generation. If it is not possible, therefore, for a family to educate all the children, perhaps due to limitations on available resources, preference is to be given to daughters, thus opening the way to terminate the process by which ignorance is transmitted from one generation to the next through mothers deprived of education. The Universal House of Justice has reiterated the importance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's instruction in calling upon "decision-making agencies" concerned with the "cause of universal education" to consider giving "first priority to the education of women and girls, since it is through educated mothers that the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society." (Universal House of Justice 1985, 27.)

The emphasis on education within the Bahá'í community is supported by a wide range of practical initiatives to foster the education of girls and women. Such initiatives vary from basic literacy training to the provision of formal secondary education for girls in certain remote areas of Africa and the Pacific.¹ The scope of these activities depends on such factors as the level of the development of the local Bahá'í community and the availability of resources. In general, Bahá'í educational initiatives aim to supplement existing systems of education and to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged groups.

One of the most concrete expressions of the Bahá'í community's commitment to the advancement of women was the establishment of a number of girls' schools in Iran in the early years of the twentieth century. At a time when

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1 For a summary of Bahá'í initiatives in the areas of literacy training and the education of women refer to Ann Boyles, *Towards the Goal of Full Partnership: One Hundred and Fifty Years of the Advancement of Women, The Bahá'í World 1993-94* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1994), pp. 237-275.

secular education was almost non-existent and religious education circumscribed and rudimentary, the Bahá'ís in Iran built an educational apparatus that was widespread—in towns and villages—and open to everyone. When these schools were closed by a government order in 1934, commitment to the education of girls and women was maintained by a program of non-formal educational activity within the Bahá'í community. These early efforts had a dramatic effect on the literacy rate among Iranian Bahá'í women. In 1973, it was announced that the Bahá'ís had achieved a literacy rate of 100 percent among women under the age of forty. (Hanson 1994, 783-86) At the time, the national literacy rate for the total population over the age of ten years was only 28 percent.²

One important Bahá'í initiative aimed at changing attitudes about girls and women is the multifaceted program carried out by the Bahá'í Vocational Institute for Rural Women in Madhya Pradesh, India. In the remote tribal villages served by this Institute there is a 90 percent illiteracy rate among women, and there is a pronounced tendency for women to be valued only for reproduction and manual work. (Boyles 1994, 255-57.)

Established in 1983, the Bahá'í Vocational Institute for Rural Women views empowerment of girls and women as a crucial element of any process aimed at creating enduring change in rural and tribal areas. The Institute pursues a broad yet practical curriculum covering health, hygiene, literacy, basic math, vocational skills, care for the environment, and moral and ethical principles, such as the equality of the sexes and global citizenship. It also fosters awareness about issues concerning the health of the girl child, the rights of women, and violence against women. In addition, to ensure that the families of the students are supportive of their efforts to change their own lives and the lives of their communities, workshops about these same issues are conducted for the members of the students' families.³

Another outstanding feature of the Bahá'í teachings on the equality of the sexes is that they call for the adoption of an identical program of education for girls and boys. The effects of adopting a curriculum that makes no distinction on the basis of sex will be profound and will give rise to far-reaching changes in society. It will, for example, help to undercut the pervasive tendency to channel males and females into separate fields of study irrespective of their capacities, and to reduce the potential segregation of women and men into areas of work that have markedly different levels of remuneration. It will also help to challenge the deep-rooted stereotypic attitude that women have neither the ability nor the temperament to succeed in areas of work where men have traditionally predominated.

² According to Khosrow Mostofi, ("Iran", *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Macropaedia, vol. 9, 1974, p. 827), "of the total population over 10 years of age in the early 1970s, only 28 percent were literate." Gender specific statistics are not provided.

³ Based on a report from the Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women in India, February 2000.

A recent study of factors involved in enhancing the role of women in village level Bahá'í community health worker programs underlined the importance of setting specific targets to recruit an equal number of women and men and of considering the life situation of women when designing a training program. (Singh-Ahderom 1998: 102 and 106.) It was reported that ongoing health projects in Kenya and Zambia that were committed to improving female involvement succeeded in raising the number of female trainees to close to 50 percent. In addition to affirming the capacity of women to complete this program of study and to provide health services on a par with the male graduates, it was observed that the female community health workers took an expanded and non-traditional role in society, for example, by speaking in public at community gatherings and by initiating consultation with local leaders.⁴

From the foregoing it can be seen that education is considered an important means of empowering women. The type of education envisaged in the Bahá'í writings promotes the acquisition of knowledge, moral values, and practical skills conducive to social evolution. It is designed to enable women to prepare themselves for active participation in all areas of human endeavor, and to perform more capably their functions as mothers and educators of the next generation.

Bahá'í principles reject rigid role delineation, patterns of domination and arbitrary decision-making; it calls for women to be welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavor; and it allows for the evolution of the roles of men and women.

The Role of the Mother in the Family

The Bahá'í principle of equality has profound implications for the definition of the roles of women and men. It impinges on all aspects of human relations and is an integral element in domestic, economic, and community life. The application of this principle entails a change in many traditional habits and practices. It rejects rigid role delineation, patterns of domination and arbitrary decision-making; it calls for women to be welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavor; and it allows for the evolution of the roles of men and women.

The Bahá'í writings define, in broad terms, the primary responsibilities of the mother and the father along lines that may well appear to be, at first sight, conventional. The distinctive feature of the Bahá'í approach is that the

⁴ In Kenya, 44 of 83 trainees were women. In Zambia, 72 out of 150 trainees were women. Statistics provided by the author in personal communication.

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roles of mother and father are not rigidly exclusive and are best seen within the context of mutual support and cooperation. There is considerable flexibility assigned to each, and changes and adjustments can be made to suit particular family situations, including the interests and capacities of each party to the marriage. Within this degree of role flexibility, the

Bahá'í teachings set out a complex of duties and responsibilities that the members of the family have toward each other and toward the family as a whole. Thus, we read:

The task of bringing up a Bahá'í child...is the chief responsibility of the mother, whose unique privilege is indeed to create in her home such conditions as would be most conducive to both his material and spiritual welfare and advancement. The training that a child first receives through his mother constitutes the strongest foundation for his future development... (Shoghi Effendi quoted in Universal House of Justice 1996, section 272.4)

In relation to the role of the husband, the teachings also indicate that, "a corollary of this responsibility of the mother is her right to be supported by her husband—a husband has no explicit right to be supported by his wife." (Universal House of Justice 1996, section 272.4.) While the man has primary responsibility for the financial support of the family, it must be noted that this function is not inflexibly fixed and can be adjusted to suit particular family situations. There is nothing in the Bahá'í teachings to preclude a wife from assuming the role of major breadwinner or a husband from taking principal responsibility for care of the children and of the home, if the couple chooses to do so. Likewise, while mothers have the chief and primary responsibility to be the first educators of the next generation, they are not excluded from the world at large, nor are men excluded from participation in homemaking activities. Bahá'ís envisage and indeed support the involvement of women and men in both the private and public spheres of activity.

Reverence for, and protection of, motherhood have often been used to justify the exclusion of women from participation in the social and economic arenas. Within the Bahá'í context, however, the role of mothers is rehabilitated and given importance beyond the immediate family setting. Motherhood is not only concerned with the rearing of children, it is also allied with no less exalted an aim than the attainment of peace.

The family that is committed to the equality of women and men can hasten the advent of peace by helping to lower the barriers to women's participation both in education and in the world at large. The unique

significance of the family's potential contribution to the development of society and the attainment of peace becomes clear in light of the following statement from 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

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 1982, 175)

In addition, the use of Bahá'í consultation within the family cements the practice of equality between the marriage partners and accords women a full voice in family decision-making. The Bahá'í writings contain the following provisions for the resolution of conflict when unanimity cannot be reached between the spouses: "There are...times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other." (Universal House of Justice 1996, section 272.5e.) Elaborating on this deference, the Universal House of Justice advises that, "there are times when the husband and wife should defer to the wishes of the other. Exactly under what circumstances such deference should take place is a matter for each couple to determine." (Women, section 76.) It is evident that the Bahá'í approach to the relationship between husband and wife cannot be reduced to the mechanical application of a set of procedural rules; it requires instead the fostering of love, respect, and mutual consideration so that matters such as decision-making can be handled properly.

It is suggested that the Bahá'í teachings, outlined in the paragraphs above, provide guidelines for strengthening the role of mothers and encouraging the spirit of cooperation in men. In addition, through the use of the process of consultation within the family, women have the opportunity to gain experience in decision-making and to acquire the practical skills to enhance their ability to make their marks as social agents.

A two-year project conducted by the Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women at the United Nations in cooperation with UNIFEM in Bolivia, Malaysia, and Cameroon provides a striking example of an initiative aimed at fostering a re-examination of sex roles through attainment of a clearer understanding of the spiritual principle of the equality of women and men and through the use of consultation. Called "Traditional Media as Change Agent," the project sought to use traditional media of song, dance, and

drama to generate discussion about the roles of women and men. In a typical instance, men and women were asked to list their daily tasks, from which it became clear that the list of women's duties was invariably at least twice as long as that of the men. Generally, three basic problems emerged: illiteracy among women, the mismanagement of family funds by men, and the unfair burden of work shouldered by women. Through the consultative process, women and men were assisted to devise means of stimulating attitudinal and behavioral change through the use of traditional media.

The significance of the project lies in the fact that it involves both women and men in collecting and analyzing information and devising constructive measures to produce change, and it addresses, at a village level, the basic problem of unequal distribution of labor among men and women. (Boyles 1994, 259-63.)

Participation of Women in the Larger Society

The Bahá'í concept of the equality of women and men calls for women to be involved in all fields of activity, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms, "women must advance and fulfill their mission in all departments of life, becoming equal to men." (Quoted in Esslemont 1980, 147.) The standard of full partnership defined in the Bahá'í writings is exemplified by a number of graphic images. These images illustrate the character of the relationship between women and men. For example, we read:

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 equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1997, section 227.18)

The wings of a bird are structurally equivalent and perform similar functions. They are simply attached to opposite sides of the bird's body, and one is not inherently to be preferred over the other. Both must work in cooperation for the bird to fly. Likewise, though differences exist between men and women, these differences are not so great as to prevent them from performing essentially similar functions. The qualities of one reinforce those of the other. Each is indispensable to the other, and one wing cannot function adequately in isolation from the other.

The writings provide another simple but profound example of the equal and complementary relationship that should exist between women and men, stating that in the "world of humanity:"

There is a right hand and a left hand...functionally equal in service and administration. If either proves defective, the defect will naturally extend to the other by involving the completeness of the whole; for accomplishment is

not normal unless both are perfect. If we say one hand is deficient, we prove the inability and incapacity of the other; for single-handed there is no full accomplishment. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 134)

Hence, it is evident that the contribution of women is indispensable in the functioning of society. Her qualities and skills cannot be discounted as "optional extras" in the world of work. Indeed, the Bahá'í writings encourage women, among other things, to "enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics" and to devote their "energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences." ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 135 and 283.) While such pursuits are specified, it does not mean that women should refrain from entering the multitude of other fields of professional activity.

According to the Bahá'í teachings, justice is the controlling principle in the operation of social institutions. The application of justice in such areas of employment as appointment, promotion, and remuneration will directly benefit women; furthermore, the application of a moral code such as that presented in the Bahá'í Faith will protect women against workplace intimidation and harassment. One of the most crucial areas requiring the application of justice is in relation to making social and economic provisions for the full and equal participation of women in all aspects of life while simultaneously reinforcing the critical functions of motherhood.

The clear mandates in the Bahá'í teachings—concerning the equality of the sexes, the flexibility of roles and functions, and the emphasis on the education of girls and women—encourage the advancement of women. They provide the means and support for women to take their place in the world as social actors. Education is a prerequisite for women to gain access to positions of influence in the world at large. As women occupy positions of prominence, so are they able to influence thought, to bring to bear peace-inducing attitudes in governmental and administrative settings, and to be involved in making decisions that affect the future of society.

The participation of women in the larger society is actively supported and fostered by the work of the Bahá'í International Community's Office for

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the Advancement of Women at the United Nations and its approximately fifty-two national affiliates throughout the world. This Office serves as a link between the Bahá'í Community and the United Nations on issues concerning women and children. It participates, for example, in the Commission of the Status of Women, the Working Group on Gender, UNIFEM's Campaign to Eliminate Violence Against Women, and supports efforts toward the passage of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In addition, the national affiliates of the Office for the Advancement of Women interact with governmental and non-governmental agencies and organizations concerned with protecting the rights and improving the status and well being of girls and women. Many of these national groups are also working within the Bahá'í community, engaging Bahá'ís in programs and projects aimed at promoting the realization of the equality of the sexes in Bahá'í community life.⁵

As a testimony to their active concern for the amelioration of the problems confronting the peoples of the world, Bahá'í women have, in recent years, been well represented at United Nations Conferences. For example, at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, 1992, ten Bahá'ís attended the official conference, of whom three were women. At the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), Copenhagen, 1995, twenty-six of the fifty-one Bahá'ís attending the official conference were women. At the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995, the Bahá'í International Community was represented by four women and one man. At the UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), Istanbul, 1996, sixteen of thirty-five Bahá'ís attending the official conference were women. In addition, large numbers of Bahá'í women participated in the NGO Forums that coincided with all of these events.⁶

As has been noted, the Bahá'í writings highlight the importance of women's contribution to peace, asserting that "when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world...wars will cease." They also link the attainment of the equality of women and men with lasting peace: "When...the equality of men and women [shall] be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed. Without equality this will be impossible..." ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 35 and 175). In this regard, a direct example of the contribution of women as social agents in the cause of peace is provided by the involvement of Bahá'í women in the global human rights campaign initiated by the Bahá'í International Community United Nations Office in 1997. According to a spokesperson, one of the principal aims of this initiative is "to

⁵ For details of these activities refer to issues of the Newsletter of the Bahá'í International Community Office for the Advancement of Women.

⁶ Information provided by the Bahá'í International Community Office for the Advancement of Women, 31 March 2000.

contribute to the global human rights education process by drawing attention to the connection between respect for human rights and the emergence of world peace." (Bahá'í International Community, Office of Public Information 1997, pp. 4-5.)

In addition to the preparation of training materials on human rights education, the Bahá'í International Community United Nations Office has, to date, conducted 14 training sessions in 13 countries for the representatives of the 99 elected national Bahá'í Assemblies invited to participate. Of the 114 individuals who took part, 61 were women.⁷

Participation of Women in Religious Organization and Administration

The Bahá'í Faith has no priesthood and no ecclesiastical structure. The religion calls for women to be fully involved in all aspects of Bahá'í community life, including the organization and administration of religion. The Founder, Bahá'u'lláh explicitly defines a role for women in religion. He specifies that women are to be on an equal footing with men within the religion, and He charges all Bahá'ís to recognize and appreciate the important contribution that women have to make in this realm of activity. It should be noted that women are not simply confined to teaching and ministering to the spiritual needs of women, they are called upon to operate "amongst men and women." (Bahá'u'lláh 1997, 255.) From the earliest days of its existence, women have become progressively more involved in the administrative activities of the Bahá'í community. They participate in a decision-making role over a constituency that includes males as well as females.

The Bahá'í administrative system functions under the direction of the Universal House of Justice, its international governing body. The Bahá'í administrative system consists of elected Local and National Bahá'í Assemblies (councils), which are scattered over the entire length and breadth of the planet and which guide and coordinate the activities of the Bahá'í community. The administrative system also includes eminent and devoted individuals who are appointed to provide a vital counseling and advisory function to the Bahá'í Assemblies and to the members of the religion.

Women and men alike are elected to membership of Bahá'í local and national Assemblies. In voting for members of these Assemblies, Bahá'ís are expected to consider:

...without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience. (Shoghi Effendi 1995, 88)

⁷ Based on internal report of the Bahá'í International Community United Nations Office, 16 November 1999.

The Bahá'í Faith eschews the use of quotas or any other artificial means to bring about the appearance of equality in institutional composition. Nevertheless, active measures are taken to foster the greater participation of women in Bahá'í administrative service, especially in areas where women are restricted by traditional practices. Measures include mentoring and other special training programs for women in skills such as consultation, planning, and the conduct of meetings, and educational initiatives directed at men to change attitudes and foster the appreciation of the value of women's contribution to the community. Steady progress has been reported in the increase of the proportion of women serving on Bahá'í administrative institutions, with well-designed surveys being carried out to measure this progress. In 1997 it was found that 32 percent of the members of 172 Bahá'í National Assemblies were women, with Europe and the Americas having the largest proportion (40 percent) and Africa having the lowest proportion (17 percent).⁸ At a regional level within the various continents, the proportions ranged from 51 percent in North America to 14 percent in West Africa. (Bahá'í International Community, Office for the Advancement of Women 1995, 81-87.) These figures measure both the progress that has been made and the need for continued endeavors. They are best assessed by comparison with the figures for representation of women in national civil legislatures, the worldwide average of which is around 13 percent. (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2000, web site.)

An important role in the development of the Bahá'í community is played by institutions that are composed of individuals of high rank who are appointed by the head of the religion. These individuals operate at the international, continental, and local levels of society. Their functions include the provision of advice, encouragement, and counseling to Bahá'í Assemblies and community members in their endeavor to practice the teachings of the Faith. A recent survey showed that the proportion of women serving in this capacity in the international realm is 62 percent; at the continental level, 34 percent are women; while the proportion of women operating at the local level is around 47 percent. (Bahá'í International Community, Office for the Advancement of Women 1995, 81-87.)

In addition to the increasing involvement of women in the administrative affairs of the Bahá'í community, Bahá'í women have, from the earliest days of the religion, been encouraged to take a leadership role in education and teaching endeavors, both within the community and in public forums. A survey of the history of the participation of women in the Bahá'í Faith will provide many examples of women from the East and the West who have excelled in this capacity.⁹

⁸ Bahá'í National Spiritual Assemblies are democratically elected institutions that are responsible for coordinating and directing the affairs of the Bahá'í community in their areas of jurisdiction.

⁹ See, for example, Janet A. Khan and Peter J. Khan, *Advancement of Women, A Bahá'í Perspective* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1998).

The Expression of the Bahá'í Mandates in Practice

The Bahá'í Faith is a religion that actively promotes change. Its members and administrative institutions are committed to the advancement of women. Bahá'ís are, however, cognizant of the fact that the task of changing attitudes and traditions that have reinforced discrimination against women is a slow and challenging process. Their commitment is motivated by the vision of equality set out in the writings of the Founder and fuelled by the conviction that the liberation of women will be an essential component of the transformation of human society and the advance of the common good.

Persistent Barriers

Implementation of the principle of the equality of men and women challenges traditional practices and necessitates a reexamination of the long-held assumptions underlying all human relationships from the family to society at large. Because it is so interwoven with all other facets of life, the practice of the equality of the sexes impinges on all human beings—women and men alike.

The efficacy of women's involvement as social agents may well be hindered by a number of traditional and cultural practices. While the Bahá'í Faith looks with respect and appreciation at the cultural diversity of humankind and does not seek to establish the dominance of any particular culture, its members are called upon to transcend those practices that do not accord with the spiritual principle of equality.

Ingrained male attitudes, the remnants of patriarchal family structures, are transmitted to the workplace, to the world of politics, and to international relations. Such attitudes relegate women to an inferior role in every field of endeavor and inculcate attitudes that are restrictive or even crippling in both women and men. They also reinforce traditional sex-role expectations, which serve to preserve separate worlds for the sexes and interfere with the mutual communication and respect needed for the development of equal and non-exploitive relationships between men and women. Among the implications of these restricting attitudes are the social pressures on women to conform to the traditional roles and the criticism and accusations of immorality women encounter when they step out of such roles and are engaged in the outside world as social actors.

Bahá'í women are challenged to overcome feelings of incapacity and insecurity and to rise to develop their inherent abilities to serve the common good. They are called upon to recognize their spiritual duty to strive for full partnership with men. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá called upon women to aspire to a level of accomplishment equal to, or even surpassing, that of men by drawing on the power of the Faith. He states,

In this wondrous Dispensation the favors of the Glorious Lord are vouchsafed unto the handmaidens of the Merciful. Therefore, they should, like unto men,

seize the prize and excel in the field, so that it will be proven and made manifest that the penetrative influence of the Word of God in this new Dispensation hath caused women to be equal with men, and that in the arena of tests they will outdo others. (Women 1990, section 103)

Support for Women as Social Actors

The Bahá'í approach to the support of women as social actors is multifaceted and evolutionary. It involves individuals, women and men, Bahá'í institutions, and all members of the community. The implementation of the principle of the equality of the sexes within the Bahá'í community is not left to chance. Its universal application is actively fostered and monitored by the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith.

Central to the implementation of the principle is the promulgation of a clear vision of the ideal Bahá'í community life, which forms a basis for systematically planned activity that is designed to create the future. The activities are of several kinds. They aim to instill and sharpen individual and community understanding of the principle of equality, to encourage the adoption of the value of equality and its practice, and to gain community support for implementing the principle in individual and social life.

Commitment to the ideal of equality gives rise to a determination to create a model community, one in which equality is truly practiced. The vision of the ideal community, articulated in the literature of the Faith, acts as a magnet to inspire and motivate individual and community alike to take steps to introduce changes so as to bring personal and social behavior into accord with the ideal. Commitment to the ideal also gives inspiration and courage to pursue the steps required for change.

The Bahá'í approach to achieving equality aims to establish the practice of it among women and men on a firm foundation. It is characterized by the implementation of the spiritual principle in an evolutionary manner over a long period of time, sustained by a commitment to fundamental change and nurtured by educational programs designed to assist individuals and communities to gradually bring attitudes and actions into conformity with the spiritual principle. The approach is, therefore, non-utopian; it is realistic and evolutionary, proceeding in a phased manner, yet never losing sight of the long-term goal.

Planning for change, which consists of concrete steps for a more conscious and thorough application of the spiritual principles of equality, is fostered by the Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies' acting in consultation with the members of the community. The Assemblies not only support the efforts of individual Bahá'ís to implement the principle of equality in daily life, but they arrange activities that both stress the importance of the principle and engage community members in actions that lead to a consolidation of behaviors that reflect equality. The planned activities enable individuals and the Bahá'í

community to take the next step in their personal and collective development. In this way, there is a progressive convergence between the ideal of equality articulated in the Bahá'í teachings and its implementation.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to provide a detailed description of specific programs for the advancement of women in the Bahá'í community and of the mechanisms within the Bahá'í administrative structures for safeguarding the practice of the equality of the sexes, we offer examples of several strategies that serve to enhance women's participation as social actors.¹⁰

Great emphasis is placed on the active encouragement of women and men to practice the principle of equality. In this regard, significant efforts are made to mobilize the support of men in the encouragement of women. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns of the consequences of failure to offer such encouragement:

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 1982, 76-77)

Clearly, such encouragement can only be effective if it is sincere and springs from genuine conviction. Bahá'í men are called upon to commit themselves to encouraging women in their aspirations and exertions. Awareness of this responsibility is derived from the realization that the full development of men cannot be accomplished without the full development of women, and that this mutual development is a prerequisite for happiness in the world. Not only are Bahá'í men called upon to encourage women, women should also receive encouragement from other women, most especially from those who have been successful in their endeavors.

In addition to encouragement, involvement in the life of the Bahá'í community affords women unique opportunities to acquire a wide variety of skills. They develop intellectual, social and administrative skills that not only benefit the Bahá'í community, but have relevance to women's role as social actors in the world at large.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of measures undertaken in the Bahá'í community for the advancement of women and of the inbuilt safeguards within the Bahá'í administration which ensure the practice of the equality into the future, refer to Janet A. Khan and Peter J. Khan, *Advancement of Women, A Bahá'í Perspective*, chapters 1, 5-7.

One avenue for the acquisition of skills is through participation in meetings designed for women. Gatherings known as women's assemblages were first called for by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1909 at a time when women in the East generally lacked both the opportunity for education and any kind of a life outside their home. (Taherzadeh, 1988, 312.) Designed as a means of increasing women's understanding of the Bahá'í Faith and of raising their level of general knowledge and personal competence and status within the community, these meetings were viewed as an important training ground for women to acquire the intellectual skills and competencies needed for participation in the evolving administrative institutions of the Faith.

Women's meetings have continuing relevance in those parts of the world where women have been socialized to be silent and deferential in the presence of men, or where they have felt intimidated from expressing their views because of the presence of men who have had the benefits of training and experience in the larger society. In such gatherings, women can gain experience and courage and thus acquire skills to be used in the Bahá'í community wherein men and women associate as equals, as well as in the wider society.

Conclusion

The mandates, described above, are being applied in the 190 countries and 45 dependent territories where the Bahá'í Faith is active throughout the world. The results thus far obtained, and the prospects for even greater progress in the advancement of women in the years ahead, are offered as a model to those seeking to assist in the emancipation of women and their liberation from the shackles of the past. The application of these mandates provides the means and support for women as they take their place in the world as social actors and enhances their unique contribution to the promotion of universal peace.

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RELIGIOUS WOMEN AS PUBLIC ACTORS



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