

The Bahá'í Faith and the Family





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When Bahá'u'lláh brought His message to the world, He established unity as the foremost requisite for establishing peace in the world:

The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.

As with the world at large, the promotion of unity within the family is the key to its well-being and happiness. Since its founding more than 100 years ago, the followers of the Bahá'í Faith have sought to build strong families within their own community. They have also, through development projects, educational programs and in forums like the United Nations, sought to promote strong families in society at large. Bahá'ís understand that families remain the most basic unit of society and they believe that, without a re-creation and revitalization of this most fundamental institution, civilization as a whole stands in peril.

Founded by Bahá'u'lláh in the last century, the Bahá'í Faith is today established in more than 230 independent countries and territories, making it the second-most widespread independent world religion. Bahá'ís come from virtually every nation, ethnic group, culture, profession and class. Yet in their commitment to building an ever advancing civilization, Bahá'ís follow a common set of principles and laws that give distinctive shape to Bahá'í family life.

Marriage

Men and women are encouraged to become thoroughly acquainted with one another's character during courtship. They are assisted by adherence to the strong personal moral standards promoted by the Bahá'í Faith which include abstinence from sex outside of marriage, as well as from the use of alcohol and mind-altering drugs.

Unity in the family is encouraged by the process leading to marriage. According to Bahá'í law, while an individual is free to choose his or her marriage partner, both must first obtain the consent of their parents. This strengthens intergenerational ties and provides an important base of support for the marriage. The ceremony is performed in the presence of community witnesses. Repeating a simple verse, "*We will all, verily, abide by the will of God,*" the two commit themselves to God and, thereby, to one another.

Though strongly discouraged, divorce is permitted. A couple must spend one year living apart attempting to reconcile, often with the assistance of the local Bahá'í Assembly, the local governing council for Bahá'í communities. If reconciliation proves impossible, a divorce may then be obtained.



Rights and Responsibilities

All family members have duties and responsibilities toward one another and to the family as a whole. Children, for instance, have the duty to obey their parents. They also have the corresponding right to be cared for, protected and educated. Mothers, as bearers and first educators of children, are primarily, but not exclusively, responsible for their spiritual education and the creation of a loving, nurturing home. Fathers bear primary responsibility for the financial well-being of the family and for the formal education of the children.

No form of violence or abuse within the family is ever to be tolerated. According to the sacred Bahá'í writings:

The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed.





The Equality of the Sexes

The principle of the equality of women and men is one of the basic teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and lends the power to transform relationships within the family. According to their status as equal partners, embodied in their identical wedding vows, neither husband nor wife may dominate. Decision-making is to be shared.

Although men and women have complementary capacities and functions in certain areas, women are encouraged to pursue their own careers, and fathers are not exempt from household duties or child-rearing. The family is the first place where the principle of the equality of women and men must be taught and practiced. Children learn their gender roles from the models provided by both parents.

Education and the Family

One of the primary responsibilities of parents is to provide for the development of their children's capacities—spiritual, moral, intellectual, emotional and physical. Therefore, both girls and boys are to be formally educated according to the same basic curriculum.

However, should resources not allow formal education to be provided for all children, daughters, as the potential educators of the next generation, are to be granted a “prior right to education over sons.”

When women are educated, as urged in the Bahá'í writings, research shows that entire families reap measurable and lasting benefits. Family income rises, and the money mothers control tends to be used for the benefit of their children. Educated women have fewer children, and those they bear tend to be healthier, better nourished, and better educated. Educating girl children appears to be one of the best ways to address national population and development concerns.

Consultation

Within the Bahá'í family, decision-making is to be shared.

“the atmosphere within the family...should express...not dictatorial authority, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation.”

The use of consultation, a non-adversarial method for decision-making, gives the institution of marriage a new resiliency in a rapidly changing world. Bahá'í consultation includes making strenuous efforts to collect all of the facts in an unbiased manner; a commitment to listen carefully to all of the diverse concerns and opinions of the parties; and the sacred commitment of all to detach themselves from egotistical and self-centred concerns in an effort to find the highest good for all. The spirit of consultation allows husbands and wives the flexibility to adjust their roles, when necessary, to meet the needs of each family member and the family as a whole.



Families and the World

The worldwide Bahá'í community also promotes strong healthy families in the world at large.

Around the world, Bahá'ís are deeply involved in education. Bahá'í communities operate more than 700 schools and learning centres around the globe. The curriculum in Bahá'í institutions of learning places a heavy emphasis on high moral standards and progressive principles like the equality of women and men. The promotion of these values in turn promotes the well-being of the family.

Likewise, Bahá'í communities worldwide are involved in numerous small-scale social and economic development projects, many of which promote strong families either through attempts to advance the status of women, or simply by teaching consultation, which can be used in the family as well as the community for non-adversarial decision-making.

Altogether, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and the activities and personal lives of its followers offer a new model for family life in the modern world - a model that combines the best of the traditional and the progressive in a manner that encourages the formation of healthy, enduring families.



For further information please contact:

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís

P.O. Box 285

Mona Vale NSW 2103

Australia

or



Photographs by :Phillip Hinton,

Barry Anderson

Jane Shotbolt

Brenton Edwards

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