

The Equality of men and women within religions

When we look at the purpose of religion, it exists to help both the individual and society advance spiritually and materially. Therefore religious laws and teachings allow society to evolve on the spiritual and material planes.

Teachings about the equality of women and men were promulgated by Bahá'u'lláh in the middle of the 19th century, as a prerequisite for the advancement of society. This is stated in many Bahá'í writings, such as:

“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; When the two wings . . . become equivalent in strength, enjoying the same prerogatives, the flight of man will be exceedingly lofty and extraordinary.”¹

This principle is also re-affirmed in many statements by the international governing body of the worldwide Bahá'í community, for example as follows:

“...the equality of men and women is not a Western construct but a Universal spiritual truth—a statement about human nature [...]. That women should enjoy equal rights with men is a requirement of justice. It is a principle consonant with the highest standard of purity and sanctity, whose application strengthens family life and is essential to the regeneration and progress of any nation. Indeed, peace in the world and the advancement of civilization depend on its realization.”²

Clearly, then, this is a fundamental principle for Bahá'ís and their representatives at the Bahá'í International Community.³ Bahá'ís worldwide endeavour to advance and realize this principle in many different ways.

Education

The Bahá'í Writings state emphatically that:

“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.”⁴

Access to education enables women and men to understand the environment in which they live and to assess what role they could play towards improving the state of the world. All should have access to education, girls and boys alike. However, one interesting element in the Bahá'í Faith applies in cases where families and communities do not have the resources to educate all their children. When resources are limited, first priority should be given to the education of women and girls. The

¹ <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/ab/SAB/sab-228.html>

² Letter addressed to the Iranian Bahá'í community, 20 June 2008

³ http://bic.org/who-we-are/About_Bahai-International-Community

⁴ <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-3-4-6.html>

education of girls is particularly important because, although both parents have responsibilities for the rearing of children, it is through educated mothers that the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively diffused throughout society.

Motherhood has the highest value, and it should under no circumstance be used as justification for keeping women socially and economically disadvantaged.

Partnership and consultation

Relationships, roles and responsibilities within a family can be determined by consultation. Consultation and discussion with others is a means to help each individual see how to put his talents and capacities to best use.

In the context of the family, the Bahá'í International Community said in a recent statement:

Roles and the allocation of responsibilities are not fixed in the Bahá'í writings; all such decisions in a Bahá'í family are to be made through family consultation, a process based on explicit principles of frankness and mutual respect. Neither husband nor wife is permitted to "unjustly dominate" the other."⁵

Structural changes

It is important to recognise that changes also need to occur in society so that women are offered the opportunity to develop in any sphere of activity they choose, and are empowered to do so.

The elimination of discrimination against women must ultimately reshape existing legal, economic, and social arrangements. Promoting the entry of greater numbers of women into positions of prominence and authority is necessary – but not sufficient to create a just social order.

In a statement on the role of boys and men, the Bahá'í International Community said:

A society characterized by gender equality serves the interests of both sexes. It enables men and women to develop in a more balanced and multifaceted way and to discard the rigid role stereotypes so crucial to shifting family dynamics, and to accord women full access to the world of work. [...] It also enables the replacement of unequal relationships and tendencies toward domination and aggression with genuine partnerships between the sexes characterized by collaboration and the sharing of resources and decision making.⁶

Individual behavioural changes

For structural changes to happen, individuals have to be willing to revisit some of their pre-conceived ideas about the role of women and men in society. Throughout its

⁵ <http://www.bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/95-0826e.htm>

⁶ <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/04-0301.htm>

contributions to the work of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Bahá'í International Community has acknowledged the challenge of changing individual behaviour, but highlighted the importance and urgency of such a change:

“At the level of the individual, change will require a fundamental rethinking in the way that boys are socialized to become men and how this socialization is carried over into family, community and public life. Differential child-rearing strategies, parental expectations as well as the abusive treatment of female family members have long perpetuated males’ sense of privilege and superiority. Furthermore, they have contributed to narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity [and] the devaluation of the contributions made by women...”⁷

Conclusion: the role of religion in this context

To encourage and promote needed change, the Bahá'í International Community recognises the key role that religions and religious leaders can play. Without generalising, we must acknowledge that religion and values influence behaviour. Our recent statements on the advancement of women point out that:

“Using religious appeals as a vehicle for their own power, proponents of extremist religious interpretations have sought to “tame” women and girls by limiting their mobility outside of the home, limiting their access to education, subjecting their bodies to harmful traditional practices, controlling attire and even killing to punish acts which were claimed to abase the family honor. It is religion itself that stands in desperate need of renewal. A core element of such renewal is the need for religious leaders to state unequivocally and become the standard bearers of the principle of equality of men and women...”⁸

And finally:

“Religious leaders and people of faith everywhere have a special responsibility to reaffirm those eternal spiritual principles that unite and bind together the hearts and release the capacities of every soul.”⁹

⁷ <http://www.bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/09-0228.htm>

⁸ <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/06-0702.htm>

⁹ <http://www.bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/95-0913.htm>