

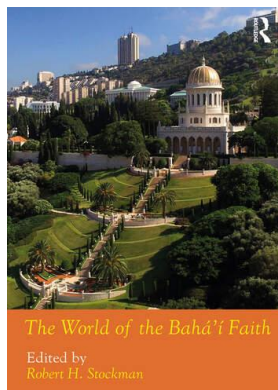
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THE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

Anne M. Pearson

The equality of women and men is a fundamental universal principle of the Bahá'í Faith, a principle whose implementation is closely linked to justice, the collective maturation of humanity, and the achievement of lasting peace. Bahá'í sacred and authoritative texts offer an unprecedented number of statements addressing gender equality, including this unequivocal statement by Bahá'u'lláh (*Women* 1986: 2, no. 2): 'Praised be God, the Pen of the Most High hath lifted distinctions from between His servants and handmaidens, and, through His consummate favours and all-encompassing mercy, hath conferred upon all a station and rank of the same plane'.

The Bahá'í concept of the equality between women and men

Before examining the meaning and implications of the equality of women and men as embodied beings interacting within social contexts, it is crucial to emphasize the Bahá'í view of that which is distinctive of and most important to the true identity of human beings: the soul. Put simply, what Bahá'í texts call the 'rational soul' is a spiritual entity unique to each person who comes into existence as it associates with a physical body at conception. Both God, the Creator, and the human soul have no sex, no gender. Following the physical death of the body, each person's soul continues to progress in its essential spiritual reality, in the worlds of God. A second crucial point is the principle of the oneness of humanity. There is no 'essential' difference among human beings. Every human is created noble and in the image of God: that is, with moral-spiritual capacities.

The purpose of the one embodied life with which each human being is gifted is to develop our spiritual attributes (trustworthiness, patience, and so forth) to the best of our abilities, following the guidance of God as conveyed through God's Manifestation for this day, Bahá'u'lláh. Men and women alike have this purpose. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Selections* 79) explains,

[In] the sight of Bahá, 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 favoured, whether man or woman.

Similarly, a letter from the Universal House of Justice (2013) to the Bahá'ís of Iran, commented that

the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice, not the least of which are those that prevent women from fulfilling their potential and engaging in various fields of endeavour shoulder to shoulder with men.

In the psycho-social physical world, equality of the sexes does not mean sameness. Self-evidently, women and men are different biologically. Historically, the majority of the world's cultures and religions over time have amplified the social and spiritual significance of the biological difference between women and men and assigned to women the primary roles and attendant duties of wife and motherhood, expressed within a domestic sphere. While the authoritative texts of the Bahá'í Faith do speak to the importance of motherhood and parenting, women's roles are by no means limited to the domestic realm. Biological and psychological differences between men and women are viewed from a Bahá'í perspective as resulting in certain complementary functions, and such functions are equally important. In this context, the word 'equivalence' (equal value) may better capture the Bahá'í perspective, alongside 'equity', which suggests that each person should be afforded the same kinds of opportunities to develop their physical, social, moral, and spiritual capacities. Again, self-evidently, human beings are not born with equal talents and abilities, yet this fact should have no bearing on a person's inherent dignity or worth.

Several analogies are used in Bahá'í texts to convey the idea that both men and women suffer (and thus humanity suffers) when the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of either sex is impeded or restricted. Analogies refer to women and men as two hands of a body or two wings of a bird:

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, *Selections* 302)

In a similar vein, at a talk to the Federation of Women's Clubs in Chicago in May of 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Promulgation* 103–6), speaking in reference to what constitutes the inequality between man and woman, said: ‘Both are human. In powers and functions each is the complement of the other. At most it is this: that woman has been denied the opportunities which man has so long enjoyed, especially the privilege of education’. He further commented that accepting ‘a distinction which God has not intended in creation is ignorance and superstition’ and reiterated that until gender equality is realized ‘the happiness and felicity of mankind will not be a reality’.

Historical barriers to gender equality

While founders of the world's religions affirmed, to some extent, the equality of women and men before God, the world has yet to see real equality in practice. The profoundly deleterious effects of gender inequality and the oppression of women continue to plague humanity, even as unprecedented efforts have been expended to address this problem since the birth of both the Bahá'í religion and the women's rights movement in the mid-nineteenth century.

Scholarship examining the historical relationship between gender, religion, and culture has demonstrated that millennia ago, the emergence of institutionalized patriarchy (in which older men assumed leadership in a family and community) in societies around the world led to the development of culture, ideology, and language along an androcentric framework. In particular, institutionalized patriarchy, legitimized by religious leaders and scholars using theology, laws, and regulations in all areas of life to exercise their interpretive and legislative authority over the general populace, enabled the formulation of gender concepts governing the presumed ‘inherent nature’ (biological determinism) of the sexes and their appropriate or ‘natural’ roles and functions. The result was that women were largely relegated to the private sphere and the margins of public religion, denied leadership roles, and in general considered inferior (Lerner 1986).

Methods that have been used to ‘keep women in their place’ have included securing women’s cooperation through gender role indoctrination and class privilege, educational deprivation, the exclusion of women from formal history, restraints and outright coercion, and discrimination in access to economic resources and political power. By and large, male gender identity and experience was privileged and rendered normative; female gender identity was rendered both deviant and ‘less than’. So pervasive has been this process that women have often internalized male-authored attitudes and norms of themselves, even when oppressive. The result of gender prejudice and systemic oppression (reproducing structures of subordination) is that women as a class, across cultures, suffer disproportionate access, compared to men, to food, health care, education, economic resources, decision-making powers, and leisure time. Women also experience disproportionate levels of domestic violence, sexual harassment, trafficking, and mass rape utilized as a tool of war (Lopez-Claros and Nakhjavani 2018). The aforementioned assumptions and patterns of practice have been challenged and corrected by the teachings on the equality of women and men found within the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh.

During many of His talks in Europe and North America in 1911–13, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed the subject of gender equality, acknowledging a long history of the oppression of women. In answer to a question about women’s status in Persia, for example, He commented on women’s ‘exceedingly deplorable’ status in former times, explaining that:

[I]t was the belief of the Orient that it was best for woman to be ignorant. It was considered preferable that she should not know reading or writing in order that she might not be informed of events in the world. Woman was considered to be created for rearing children and attending to the duties of the household. If she pursued educational courses, it was deemed contrary to chastity; hence women were made prisoners of the household.

He then went on to declare that

Bahá’u’lláh destroyed these ideas and proclaimed the equality of man and woman. He made woman respected by commanding that all women be educated, that there be no difference in the education of the two sexes and that man and woman share the same rights.

(Promulgation 230)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also observed that in the past, the world had been ruled by force, ‘and man has dominated over women by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities of both body and mind’. But, He noted, ‘the balance is 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’, and thus the new era in humanity’s development ‘will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced’ (*Women* 1986: 13). While such comments may appear to essentialize or stereotype ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ qualities, thereby evoking the ‘nature/nurture’ debate, this is not so. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s teachings suggest, first, that mutual integration and balance in the expression of such qualities is required for *both* women and men, and second, certain (undervalued) spiritual and social strengths associated with women are now of vital importance to a changing world, a world in which hierarchy, claims to superiority, and aggression must give way to consultation, collaboration, compassion, and service.

The advancement of women and peace

In other talks, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Promulgation* 325, 106) described the lack of equality between man and woman as ‘contrary to divine justice’, a ‘cause of dissension’ and ‘discord and separation’, making it impossible to establish unity and harmony in the family or the world at large. Without equality, ‘social and political progress’ will not be possible and ‘the happiness and felicity of mankind will not be a reality’. By contrast, the positive effects of the realization in practice of gender equality will be greater social cohesion, unity, well-being, and prosperity for all. Indeed, the achievement of equality between women and men is considered to be a prerequisite to peace. In one talk given in Pittsburgh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Promulgation* 149–50) said ‘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’. He suggested that women have a natural inclination to oppose war because of the value women place on their experience as mothers, who will refuse to sacrifice their children to war. He recognized, in other words, women’s vested interest and life-long labour in bearing and raising children, anticipating women’s refusal to allow the evidence and benefit to society of this valuable work to be so carelessly squandered. ‘In truth’, He continued in the same talk, ‘she will be the greatest factor in establishing universal peace and international arbitration. Assuredly, woman will abolish warfare among mankind’.

In sum, the Bahá’í teachings say that when women receive the same educational opportunities as men; when they have a seat at the decision-making table, participating ‘fully and equally in the affairs of the world’; and when they ‘enter confidently and capably the great arenas of law and politics’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá *Promulgation* 189), women will contribute to the establishment of peace by forming an overwhelming consensus opposed to war. In the same vein, when the Universal House of Justice (1986: 13) wrote on the subject of peace addressed to the peoples of the world in 1985, it cited issues of immediate relevance to the establishment of peace, including the achievement of equality between the sexes. ‘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 document affirms.

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. There are no grounds, moral, practical, or biological, upon which such denial can be justified. 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.

(idem)

Bahá'ís are not alone, of course, in linking the advancement of women to the well-being of all humanity and to the creation of a culture of peace. For instance, the Beijing Declaration presented at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in 1995 stated in point 13: 'Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace' (Beijing Declaration 1995).

Requisites and approach to gender equality

Undoubtedly, the realization of gender equality requires fundamental reforms in family, social, economic, and political structures. Repeated references in Bahá'í texts to the importance of education for human development and the achievement of equality of all kinds explain why, since its inception, the Bahá'í community has placed such an emphasis on education and the creation of educational institutions. Education means, first and foremost, the process of the transformation of consciousness—from prevailing attitudes and beliefs to new paradigms. For Bahá'ís, this change of consciousness is most effective when informed and guided by the authority of divine revelation. Changes in one's understanding or perspective on equality gained through the acquisition of knowledge of spiritual principles and through the development of critical thinking skills ought to lead to shifts in attitudes and values, resulting in changes in behaviour, practices, policies, and laws supportive of gender equity and inclusion. This is a long-term undertaking.

The Bahá'í approach to the implementation of the principle of gender equality, then, is one that favours an organic, evolutionary, systematic process in which, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Women* 1986: 6, no. 11) noted, 'differences will, day by day, be entirely wiped out'. It is an approach that avoids contestation and conflict and emphasizes education and capacity building, reflection, and consultation predicated upon wisdom and discernment. It is also one that emphasizes the important role of men and boys in advancing equality, recognizing that rigid role stereotypes have been harmful to men as well as women. On this connection, the Bahá'í Writings note, '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' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 133). The Bahá'í approach further aims to build genuine partnerships between the sexes, characterized by attention to each other's needs, collaboration, and the sharing of resources and decision making. A letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice (in *Women* 1986: 58, no. 120) to an individual in 1984 notes that the principle of the equality between women and men

can be effectively and universally established among the friends when it is pursued in conjunction with all the other aspects of Bahá'í life. Change is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one's self and others, loving education and the passage of time as the believers deepen their knowledge of the principles of the Faith, gradually discard long-held traditional attitudes and progressively conform their lives to the unifying teachings of the Cause.

With respect to education, since the late nineteenth century, Bahá'í communities have made special efforts to start schools where there were none—in particular, to launch schools for girls in recognition of the Bahá'í principle of prioritizing the girl child for education in societies and households where access to learning remains constrained by economic scarcity. There are numerous examples of schools for girls started by Bahá'ís. One of them, for instance, is the Tarbiyat School for Girls, established in Tehran in 1910, with the help of American Bahá'í Dr

Susan Moody. In a notable early example of cross-cultural collaboration among Bahá'ís, other American women went to Iran to serve at the school, including Lillian Kappes, Dr Genevieve Coy, Adelaide Sharp, and Elizabeth Stewart, who served as a nurse. Since then, hundreds of Bahá'í-inspired schools and development projects focused on the advancement of women have been initiated around the world. Noteworthy examples include the Faizi Vocational Institute for Rural Women, established in India in 1983 (called, since 2001, the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women), and the Banani International Secondary School for Girls in Zambia (now known as the Banani International School), opened in 1993.

Gender equality and family life

In the Bahá'í teachings, family life is based not on authoritarian rule but on a consultative partnership model founded on principles of mutual respect and unity with the overarching goal of preserving the family bond. Neither husband nor wife may unjustly dominate the other (*Women* 1986: 30, no. 64). Each member of the family has rights that need to be respected and obligations that need to be fulfilled. In Bahá'í law, for instance, a mother who assumes the primary responsibility of raising the children when they are young has the right to be supported economically by her husband. Parental responsibilities are taken very seriously. The allocation of roles, however, is not rigidly prescribed; they can be changed to suit particular family situations.

Reverence for motherhood in religions and cultures around the world has had the tendency to put women as mothers (in the abstract) on an exalted pedestal. Both wifehood and motherhood have been considered the befitting roles for women while, at the same time, infertile women have been denigrated and unmarried women and widows stigmatized. In the Bahá'í teachings, motherhood and the moral education of children are conferred great honour and nobility. Yet motherhood is not the only choice for women, nor is it meant to marginalize them. The Bahá'í Writings envision a future in which social, economic, and political systems have been transformed to enable women who are mothers to be fully supported in the crucial work of parenting without losing social and economic status. This is also true for fathers who choose to stay at home to raise their offspring. Both men and women need to be able to re-enter their professions without penalty. A far more flexible work system is imagined than is presently the case in most countries, even as parental leave is now becoming somewhat more common.

Bahá'í laws and gender equality

Bahá'í law is principally contained in Bahá'u'lláh's book *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. In keeping with the organic growth of the Faith and the maturation of Bahá'í communities, Bahá'í laws are being applied only gradually under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. For example, currently applicable to Persian Bahá'ís only is the provision of a dowry from husband to wife, to be used as she wishes. Though a specified sum, it is largely symbolic, representing the wife's right to a level of economic independence. Gender differences in the laws are few and can be categorized as either 'permissive'—that is, optional exemptions such as fasting during a woman's menstrual period, or going on pilgrimage (optional for women but obligatory for men if they are able to afford it)—or 'default' (applicable only in the absence of an intention expressed to the contrary). An example of default provisions are rules of intestacy by which inheritance law applies when there is no valid or enforceable will (Schweitz 1995: 22). All Bahá'ís are encouraged to create a will, but where there is intestacy, inheritance laws (not yet in effect) favour

men with the understanding that husbands financially support wives and children, and sons are expected to support widowed mothers.

Among other relevant laws, sexual chastity for both men and women before marriage is required. Bahá'í marriage is self-chosen between a man and a woman, requires the consent of their parents, and is to be monogamous. There is no requirement to change one's name. Divorce, while strongly discouraged, is permissible, may be initiated by either husband or wife, and requires a year of separation before it may be finalized. In the case of adultery, the same fine is imposed on offending men and women. (Again, this law is not yet in effect.) There are no dress restrictions for either women or men, though modesty for all is a general ideal.

Gender equality in public life and Bahá'í administration

It was noted previously that gender equality requires that women be enabled to participate in all fields of work and public life in general. 'Abdu'l Bahá (*Women* 1986: 53, no. 106) encouraged women to 'prove' their latent capabilities by becoming proficient in the arts and sciences and to 'especially devote' their 'energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences, seeking to assist mankind in that which is most needful' for by such means their equality 'in the social and economic equation' will be recognized. With respect to Bahá'í administration, which rests on two pillars—appointed and elected institutions—women's representation in these institutions has gradually increased over the course of the last century.

In the appointed institutions, individuals hold influence in an advisory capacity but without decision-making authority; in the elected institutions, decision-making authority is held by the collective body, not by individuals. As there is no priesthood or ecclesiastical structure in the Bahá'í Faith, that element of religious organization which has traditionally been associated with the suppression of women is removed (Khan and Khan 1998: 9). Authoritative interpretation is restricted to 'Abdu'l Bahá and Shoghi Effendi; legislative authority is restricted to the Universal House of Justice. It is important to note that administrative rank does not carry with it the implication of a higher spiritual station. Further, the provisions of the Covenant prevent individuals or groups from claiming authority (and the means to undermine the commitment to establishing equality). The power to effect change is vested in every Bahá'í, and all people, men and women, are obligated to contribute to an ever-advancing civilization.

On the appointed side of Bahá'í administration, numerous women have been appointed at all levels, including in the highest ranks as 'Hands of the Cause of God' and later as members of the International Teaching Centre, the most important advisory institution to the House of Justice. There is close to gender parity among those appointed as 'Continental Counsellors' and 'Auxiliary Board Members' and to national committees. The percentage of women serving as counselors rose from 24 percent in 1980 to 48 percent of 81 counselors serving worldwide in 2010 (Bahá'í World Centre 2013), and as of 2020, the majority of the counsellor members of the International Teaching Centre were women.

On the elected side, in keeping with the gradualist approach to implementing gender equality, attentive to cultural and other circumstance, women were not initially elected to local Spiritual Assemblies in Iran. The restriction was removed in 1954 when Shoghi Effendi granted full rights to Bahá'í women to participate in the membership of both national and local Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies (*Women* 1986: 55, no. 110). Initially in North America too, women were not elected to the nascent Spiritual Assemblies; however, in 1909 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself intervened to make it absolutely clear that women and men should both be eligible to serve on the membership of local and national administrative bodies (Khan and Khan 1998: 187). When the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada was elected

in 1922, Corinne True received the highest number of votes and functioned as its financial secretary (Khan and Khan 1998: 175). Currently, some 41 percent of members of the elected National Spiritual Assemblies across the world are women.

One exception to the election of women to a Bahá'í institution is the Universal House of Justice. In clarifying this exception, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Selections* 80) stated that the House of Justice, 'according to the explicit text of the Law of God, is confined to men; this for a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon'. While perturbing to some Bahá'ís, the reason for this exclusion is not presently known. The Universal House of Justice (1988) has expressly noted that this exclusion 'does not constitute evidence of the superiority of men over women'. Women do directly participate in the election of the Universal House of Justice as members of national Spiritual Assemblies.

Exemplifying, implementing, and practising gender equality

This last section offers a brief historical overview of the implementation of gender equality in the Bahá'í community, along with selected examples of outstanding Bahá'í women in the formative years of the Bahá'í Faith, women who continue to serve as inspiration for Bahá'ís to this day. Perhaps the earliest such person is Fátimih Umm-Salámih (1817–52), born the daughter of a mullá in Qazvin and best known by a title conferred on her by Bahá'u'lláh: Ṭáhirih, or the 'Pure'. While she remains a renowned poet outside of Bahá'í circles, she was, significantly, among the first to independently recognize the station of the Báb, and He, in turn, recognized her as one of the highly esteemed 'Letters of the Living'. Thereafter, she became an eloquent promulgator of His teachings. She challenged prevailing norms, including by removing her veil on occasion, and eventually sacrificed her life for her new Faith. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Promulgation* 103), she

discomfited the learned men of Persia by her brilliancy and fervor. When she entered a meeting, even the learned were silent. She was so well versed in philosophy and science that those in her presence always considered and consulted her first. Her courage was unparalleled; she faced her enemies fearlessly until she was killed [by the anti-Bábí forces sweeping the land in 1852].

During His life, Bahá'u'lláh encouraged the participation of women in the work of the Bahá'í Cause, praised the services of the female believers, appointed them to significant roles (such as custodianship of the house of the Báb), and wrote tablets in honour of some of His female followers. He conferred the title Navváb ('highness') on His devoted wife Ásíyih *Khánum*, whom He also assisted in domestic duties and grieved with on the death of their son Mírzá Mihdí and for whom He revealed a Tablet of Visitation on her death, praising her spiritual qualities (Khan and Khan 1998: 142–147). He also conferred the honoured title 'Greatest Holy Leaf' on His daughter Bahíyyih *Khánum*, 'the most outstanding heroine of the Bahá'í dispensation' (Universal House of Justice 1982). Bahíyyih *Khánum* (1846–1932) played vital roles in the work of the Faith during the ministries of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi. Never married, she steadfastly shared her family's banishments and travails and was a source of comfort and wisdom to all. She was entrusted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá with managing the affairs of the Cause during His absences from Palestine, work which included helping protect the Faith from adversaries. She also held the reins of the Faith for two years between 1922 and 1924 while Shoghi Effendi, newly appointed as Head of the Bahá'í Community, withdrew to prepare himself for his role. In one of many lengthy homages offered by Shoghi Effendi (*Bahá'í World* 1936: 174) to his beloved great-aunt after her passing, he wrote that only future generations

can, and will, pay a worthy tribute to the towering grandeur of her spiritual life, to the unique part she played throughout the tumultuous stages of Bahá'í history, to the expressions of unqualified praise that have streamed from the pen of both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. . . . [T]he share she has had in influencing the course of some of the chief events in the annals of the Faith, the sufferings she bore, [and] the sacrifices she made.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, carrying out His ordained function of providing authoritative interpretation of the Bahá'í teachings, elaborated and frequently promoted the principle of equality in His writings and talks. He placed this principle within the context of its timeliness within humanity's collective maturation and framed its application as a matter of justice. He challenged stereotypic thinking, helping people understand how not only the progress of humanity as a whole but also men's own development are directly related to the advancement of women. Importantly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life also serves as a model for Bahá'ís of how to apply this principle. He had a close relationship with his wife of 50 years, Munírih Khánum. He sent two of His granddaughters to colleges in Cairo and England (Khan and Khan 1998: 182). He encouraged women to rise to higher levels of education and attainment and to draw strength and inspiration from their faith. He promoted 'women's assemblages' where Bahá'í women could gather, study, raise their consciousness, and practice setting forth 'proofs and evidences' (*Women* 1986: 50, no. 99). He also promoted the full involvement of women in the work of the Bahá'í community and assigned them positions of responsibility: for example, Ethel Rosenberg, England's first female Bahá'í, tasked with convening a committee in London (prior to the formation of the UK's national Spiritual Assembly) to administer the affairs of the expanding Bahá'í community; Agnes Parsons, a prominent Washington socialite, given the task of organizing interracial gatherings at a time when such gatherings bordered on the scandalous; and American Lua Getsinger, who was asked to travel to the Middle East and India for the purpose of spreading the Bahá'í message (Khan and Khan 1998: 172–178).

Shoghi Effendi, Head of the Faith from 1921 to 1957, in turn, helped Bahá'ís deepen their understanding of the application of the essential principle of gender equality through his voluminous letters to individuals and institutions (especially to Bahá'í communities in Iran and other parts of Asia where there were more barriers and resistance to women's participation in public life). He, too, recognized and drew on the capacities of women, giving them international assignments, such as to Australian photographer Effie Baker, tasked with making a photographic record of Bahá'í historical sites in Iran, and American Keith Ransom-Kehler, whom he sent to Iran in 1932 to intercede with the Persian government in an attempt to have the ban on the circulation of Bahá'í literature lifted. She is one of eight extraordinary women whom Shoghi Effendi appointed to the rank, two posthumously, as Hands of the Cause. The other women were Dorothy Baker, Clara Dunn, Corinne True, Agnes Alexander, Martha Root, Amelia Collins (whose many distinguished services to the Faith included being appointed by Shoghi Effendi to membership on the International Bahá'í Council, the precursor of the Universal House of Justice), and Rúhíyyih Khánum (née Mary Maxwell), the illustrious Canadian-born wife of Shoghi Effendi.¹

The Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith since 1963, has continued to elucidate the principle of gender equality in its messages to Bahá'í institutions and individuals and to guide and encourage the process of its implementation in community life. Measures taken include assigning a goal in 1974, during the Five-Year Plan, for 80 National Spiritual Assemblies to arrange activities for Bahá'í women in countries where traditional restrictions on the freedom of women have been pronounced. Over 150 women's

conferences occurred during this period and many more again during the Seven-Year Plan (1979–86), along with specific activities to foster the progress of women.² Under the direction of the Bahá'í International Community (BIC), Bahá'í representatives also participated in the major conference convened by the United Nations during the UN Decade for Women (1976–85). In addition, the BIC has released over 30 substantive statements offering Bahá'í perspectives on gender equality and contributing to current discourses on themes such as the spiritual basis of women's rights, ameliorating the conditions of the girl child, the role of boys and men in advancing equality, eradicating violence against women, and the role of media in advancing gender equality.³

In 1993 the Universal House of Justice established an Office for the Advancement of Women under the BIC. Under its leadership, in addition to sending an official Bahá'í delegation to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, it made a major contribution to the planning and executing of the NGO Forum on Women, mobilizing 500 Bahá'ís from throughout the world to lend their active support to this important gathering. Since then, the BIC, through its six international offices, has continued to work closely with UN agencies and civil society partners to create more effective mechanisms for gender equality. As of the year 2020, the equality of women and men remains one of six areas of special focus of the BIC, underscored by the conviction that implementing equality will revolutionize all facets of human society.

Bahá'ís are cognizant that it takes time to change centuries of patterns of thought and habit, especially with regard to gender roles. Yet they are also clear that the emancipation of one half of the human race will release vast capacities to contribute to the advancement of material and spiritual civilization. Bahá'ís are confident that this is the will of God, and this faith provides the motivational energy, direction, and resolve to persevere in the effort to translate the explicit precepts of their religion concerning gender equality into action. Decades of experience have shown Bahá'ís throughout the world that when growing numbers of women and men of all ages and backgrounds work together to learn about patterns of relationships and corresponding social structures that reflect the oneness of the human family, profound transformation is possible (Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity 2009, BIC 2018).

Notes

- 1 More information about the lives of these exceptional women may be found in Ruhe-Schoen 1998, among other sources.
- 2 For descriptions of Bahá'í social and economic development programs for the advancement of women carried out throughout the world prior to 1995, see Boyles (1994), along with reports from the annual publication of *The Bahá'í World*.
- 3 These statements can be found on <https://www.bic.org/statements/>.

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