

The Equality of Women The Bahá'í Principle of Complementarity

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Abstract

The Bahá'í teachings simultaneously assert the equality of men and women while advocating in some cases distinct duties according to gender. Since the Bahá'í Faith also teaches that religious convictions should be examined by the "standards of science," this ostensible paradox invites careful study. At the heart of the response to this query is the Universal House of Justice statement that "equality between men and women does not, indeed physiologically it cannot, mean identity of functions." To appreciate and to accept this thesis that there can be gender distinction, even insofar as the assignment of fundamental tasks is concerned, without any attendant diminution in the role of women, we must turn to statements in the Bahá'í writings about the complementary relationship between men and women. Through a careful consideration of this principle, we can discover how there can indeed be gender distinction without inequality in status or function.

Résumé

Les enseignements bahá'ís affirment l'égalité de l'homme et de la femme tout en préconisant dans certains cas des responsabilités distinctes basées sur la sexe. Puisque la foi bahá'íe enseigne également que les convictions religieuses doivent être examinées selon "les normes de la science," ce paradoxe apparent requiert une étude soigneuse. Le point essentiel de la réponse à cette question repose dans l'affirmation de la Maison universelle de justice qui veut que "l'égalité entre l'homme et la femme ne signifie pas, et ne peut physiologiquement signifier, qu'ils aient des fonctions identiques." Pour pouvoir évaluer et accepter cette thèse selon laquelle il peut y avoir une distinction entre les sexes, même lorsqu'il s'agit de l'attribution de tâches fondamentales, sans pour autant diminuer le rôle de la femme, nous devons nous tourner vers les déclarations contenues dans les écrits bahá'ís portant sur la relation complémentaire qui existe entre l'homme et la femme. Un examen soigneux de ce principe peut nous amener à découvrir comment il peut en effet y avoir une distinction entre les sexes sans aucune implication concomitante d'inégalité de statut ou de fonction.

Resumen

Las enseñanzas bahá'ís afirman simultáneamente la igualdad del hombre y la mujer, abogando a la vez en algunos casos deberes específicos de acuerdo con el género. Como la Fe Bahá'í también enseña que los convencimientos religiosos deben examinarse con las "normas de la ciencia," ésta aparente paradoja invita a un estudio a fondo. Esencial a la respuesta a ésta averiguación está la declaración de la Casa Universal de Justicia de que "La igualdad entre el hombre y la mujer no significa, y es más, fisiológicamente no permite, una identidad de funciones." Para apreciar y aceptar la tesis de que puede haber diferenciación de tareas fundamentales sin que haya disminución concomitante en la función de la mujer, debemos valernos de aquellas declaraciones en las Escrituras Bahá'ís referentes a la relación complementaria entre el hombre y la mujer. Al dar consideración cuidadosa a éste principio logramos descubrir ciertamente como puede haber diferenciación de géneros sin acompañamiento de insinuación de desigualdad en función o condición social.

Among the most distinguishing features of the Bahá'í Revelation is the concept of revelation itself, the belief delineated in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* that the purpose of religion historically is to raise by degrees human consciousness to the realities of the spiritual world. From such a view, religion consists of two distinct but inextricably linked processes: the unveiling of eternal verities and the subsequent application of that enlightenment to human social structures.

As a corollary of this twofold process, the Bahá'í scriptures teach that knowledge of truth is inseparable from deeds, but not simply because action gives dramatic form to understanding. The concretizing of a verity in the artifice of human society heightens our perception of that truth and thereby gives rise to more ample expression. Indeed, this reciprocity of causality is at the heart of the Bahá'í belief in the evolution of human society.

The interdependence of knowledge and deed is, thus, no mere moral dictum, but a thoroughly practical

relationship because it is ordained for the training of humanity, and its connection with the principle of the equality of women with men is strategic. For while we are only now beginning to come to terms with how to translate this revealed truth into human relationships and institutions, the principle itself is eternal. Bahá'u'lláh states unequivocally that “women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God...” (*Women* 26). Therefore, inasmuch as this verity is eternal, we cannot in one sense say that either Bahá'u'lláh or the Bahá'í Faith has caused women to be equal to men—they always have been so. However, by unveiling this eternal truth to humanity and by further inaugurating laws and institutions that embody this spiritual reality, the Manifestation empowers us to make this relationship, which already exists in the “sight of God,” extant in every aspect of human society as well.

Of course, it is important to understand that while Manifestations of the past may not have given explicit utterance to the equality of men and women, the emergence in various religions of contrary beliefs is not to be attributed to the Prophets. These are distortions, perversions, and misunderstandings of Their teachings. Thus, Christ never advocated the sort of subordination of women that we find implicit in some Pauline letters and explicit in the antifeminist treatises of St. Jerome and other patristic leaders of early Christianity, and yet such beliefs still afflict much of contemporary Christian thought.

Therefore, to appreciate the divine methodology whereby certain principles must await the fullness of time to be made explicit, we need to understand more generally the concept of timeliness as it regards revealed truth. For example, no doubt some of the Iranian Bahá'í women may have been troubled upon receiving 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letter early in this century stating that they should “now engage in matters of pure spirituality and not contend with men” (*Women* 7). At the time, this advice may have seemed to contradict his other statements about women having an equal role in all aspects of human society and governance, but the pragmatic benefits derived from this temporary delay later became apparent. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wisdom calls to mind Bahá'u'lláh's general statement about the timeliness of revealed truth:

How manifold are the truths which must remain unuttered until the appointed time is come! Even as it hath been said: “Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it” (*Gleanings* 176)

Accordingly, we may safely presume that Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and explicit directives regarding the equality of women imply that humanity currently has both the experience and capacity to comprehend this relationship as well as the social circumstance to implement it in human society.

Such logic seems to underlie 'Abdu'l-Bahá's observation that “the world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind” (*Star of the West* 3.3: 4). And yet, humanity has for some time emerged from a primitive state wherein survival depended on physical prowess. Furthermore, even among the animal kingdom and in many tribal societies, there exists distinction of function between male and female without any attendant sense of oppression, disdain, or subordination. Consequently, we can infer a third requisite for the timeliness of revealed truth, the emergence of a universal need that arises from a state of imbalance, ill-health, and functional disorder, a condition which occurs whenever operant spiritual laws are ignored or violated. In short, humankind is now thoroughly motivated to acknowledge the equality of women because we are experiencing the dire crisis that has resulted from a society's domination by males and so-called male attributes (i.e., the emphasis on territoriality, materialism, acquisitiveness, aggression, etc.).

From the Bahá'í view, then, the timeliness of the principle of equality of women with men is not simply that this is one among a myriad of newly revealed verities. The very pathology and ecology of contemporary human crisis is significantly attributable to the violation of this fundamental principle, because the need for a complementary balance between male and female aspects of ourselves and of our collective enterprise is essential to creating a just and functional society, as several statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirm:

In past ages humanity has been defective and inefficient because it has been incomplete. War and its ravages have blighted the world.... (*Promulgation* 108)

...it is well established that mankind and womankind as parts of composite humanity are coequal and that no difference in estimate is allowable.... (*Promulgation* 133)

The world of humanity consists of two parts: male and female. Each is the complement of the

other. Therefore, if one is defective, the other will necessarily be incomplete, and perfection cannot be attained. (*Promulgation* 134)

...the new age will be an age less masculine, and more permeated with the feminine ideals.... (*Star of the West* 3.3: 4)

At first thought, it might seem that the entire remedy for this disease would be relatively obvious and simple—to offset the imbalance by increasing the status of women, and indeed numerous statements in the Bahá'í writings affirm that this is a crucial part of the solution:

...the education of woman will be a mighty step toward its [war's] abolition and ending, for she will use her whole influence against war. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 108)

Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge. (Universal House of Justice, "To the Peoples of the World" 13)

Similarly, the Bahá'í writings state that the only reason this imbalance has occurred is the deprivation women have experienced in educational opportunity:

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, *Promulgation* 136–37)

But noble and salutary as have been the efforts on the part of Bahá'í and secular movements in remedying this imbalance in opportunity, such responses are, by themselves, inadequate, incomplete, and even possibly unfortunate when they are pursued without a clear understanding of the overall truth underlying the relationship between the sexes in a healthy society. For example, one understandable reaction to the injustices that erroneous ideas of gender distinction have produced has been the perception that all notions of gender are unnecessary, illogical, artificial, and condemnable. One might even infer from some passages in the Bahá'í writings that this is a correct assumption:

Equality of the sexes will be established in proportion to the increased opportunities afforded woman in this age, for man and woman are equally the recipients of powers and endowments from God, the Creator. God has not ordained distinction between them in His consummate purpose. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 300)

However, the term *distinction* in this passage clearly refers not to difference in function but to degree of status or equality of human powers, such as reason, intellect, enlightenment, spirituality. It is similar to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's use of the term in the statement, "The sex distinction which exists in the human world is due to the lack of education for woman..." (*Promulgation* 300). 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not here implying that there is no difference between the sexes but that the unjust distinctions which currently obtain are baseless and unfounded.

Another similarly understandable but likewise counterproductive response to the injustice and subordination created by traditional gender roles has been the tacit re-creation of women in the image of men, even while we acknowledge that the male role is unbalanced, unhealthy, and the cause of much of humanity's contemporary dilemma. Instead of inducing balance, such a response can exacerbate the very imbalance that has so afflicted human society by producing even more human beings in the mold of the stereotypical male.

What, then, is distinctive about the Bahá'í notion of a cure for this imbalance and what is further unique about the Bahá'í paradigm for a natural, proper, healthy, but egalitarian relationship between women and men? As with other social problems, the Bahá'í position is not an Aristotelian mean between extremes, not a point of moderation between those who deem gender itself as a meaningless distinction and those who view the woman's role as confined to some narrow province of domestic duties. It is, instead, a simple yet subtle principle of co-equal complementarity. The principle is simple because it retains a sense of gender distinction as natural while affirming the absolute equality of status. It is subtle because we have come to consider *equality* as synonymous with *identicalness* (particularly insofar as discussions of gender are concerned), yet the Universal House of Justice states forthrightly that "equality of status does not mean identity of function" (*Women* 31).

It is of utmost importance, therefore, that we have a clear understanding of how these two qualities can

exist simultaneously in the same principle, and perhaps the best place to begin is with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s often cited comparison of humanity to a bird:

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. (*Selections* 302)

We should carefully note that in this analogy humanity is neither male nor female. It is an independent organism that uses two distinct faculties—men and women. We should further note that neither wing has any meaning or purpose without the other; they have a completely complementary relationship. Most important of all, we should observe that the primary objective of the bird is neither the amalgamation of one wing with the other nor solely the possession of two wings, particularly two of the same type (two left wings or two right wings). The goal of the organism is flight, and flight is achieved only when each wing retains its distinct identity and function but is precisely equal to the other in power and status:

The solution provided in the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh is not...for men to become women, and for women to become men. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave us the key to the problem when He taught that the qualities and functions of men and women “complement” each other. (Universal House of Justice, quoted in *Women* 16)

This Bahá’í concept of gender distinction co-existing with absolute equality of status is thus at the heart of any perception of this revealed truth, and it must be understood and appreciated before we can hope to approach the second of our twin duties, the institutionalization of this principle in Bahá’í laws and relationships. But we quickly discover that even if we have a relatively clear sense of the principle in theory, the application of this concept of complementarity to social relationships requires careful consideration. For example, we must begin by disabusing ourselves of the connotative responses we all share with regard to traditional gender distinction because gender roles have so often been promulgated for the purpose of suppression and subordination of women: The male had his province (the world of business, politics, the running of society) and the woman hers (the home, the children, the church). Let us attempt, therefore, an objective look at some of the most obvious gender distinctions with regard to function in the Bahá’í society to understand how a division of duties can exist without unjust and inappropriate distinctions of status or authority.

We find in the Bahá’í writings statements that attribute “primary responsibility for the financial support of the family” to the man, and statements which describe the woman as “chief and primary educator of the children” (*Women* 33). We may understandably blanch at the assignment of these duties solely on the basis of sex differences because connotatively these duties call to mind contexts in which similar role distinctions have been used to circumscribe and subordinate women. We may have an equally skeptical response to the statement by the Universal House of Justice that “homemaking is a highly honourable and responsible work of fundamental importance for mankind” (*Women* 33). If we take these gender distinctions out of the Bahá’í context, lump them together with some other gender distinctions in Bahá’í law regarding such things as dowry, inheritance, exemption from “military engagements” (*Women* 12), and membership on the Universal House of Justice, we may infer a general contradiction between the enunciation of the egalitarian relationship and the implementation of that truth in Bahá’í society.

To appreciate the distinguishing characteristics of the Bahá’í paradigm, we must first realize that there is no single issue or explanation that governs all distinctions of function as regards gender. The exigencies of family life dictate parental roles, whereas the restriction of membership on the Universal House of Justice to men has its own special wisdom. For example, let us approach the rationale for gender distinction with regard to functions in the Bahá’í family. In Bahá’í society, parental responsibility is in many ways the most essential and pivotal function of community life, since the training of children is viewed as the primary means by which the bird of humankind takes flight and an “ever-advancing civilization” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 215) is fostered. As a result of this priority, the duties of both parents are carefully focused on this crucial task.

Thus, because of physiological fact, the woman as mother has obligations regarding children that men do not have to the same degree, “for it is the mother who rears, nurtures and guides the growth of the child” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 133–4). Likewise, and we may presume to facilitate the mother’s duty, the father has obligations that the mother does not have—“primary responsibility for the financial support of the family...” (Universal House of Justice, quoted in *Women* 33).

But we must immediately note that these are “primary” areas of responsibility in the context of a marriage in which there are children. Such distinctions most emphatically do *not* imply that the man has no parental responsibilities or that the woman is less capable than the man of earning a living, that the woman does not have full

and equal part in making all financial decisions, or that the woman should not have a vocation. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice notes that these relationships and responsibilities must be worked out within the exigencies of each individual family, that “family consultation will help to provide the answers” (*Women* 34), and of course, in such consultation, neither sex has primacy of authority or status. In addition, the Universal House of Justice notes that the role of the woman as mother “does not by any means imply that the place of women is confined to the home” (*Women* 33).

The reason for gender distinction as regards parental functions thus seems centered around this essential goal of society to advance itself by training its children and the pivotal role of the family as a divinely ordained organism in accomplishing that task, a duty that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states is so important that neglect of this duty is a “sin unpardonable” (*Bahá’í World Faith* 398). It is perhaps understandable, then, that the crucial nature of this function dictates that the woman be released from financial responsibilities to accomplish the initial stages of this process. We might, also assume that the man’s right of inheritance with regard to intestacy is likewise bound up in his special financial responsibilities in Bahá’í family life, obligations that might render the appellation “head” of the family appropriate to the father as it relates to his special financial duties: “... it can be inferred from a number of the responsibilities placed upon him, that the father can be regarded as the ‘head’ of the family” (from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand, December 28, 1980, quoted in *Lights of Guidance* 218).

However, this designation carries with it no special authority, but rather demonstrates that because the family as an organic enterprise is “a very special kind of ‘community’,” it reflects a division of duties according to the exigencies of this function:

The members of a family all have duties and responsibilities towards one another and to the family as a whole, and these duties and responsibilities vary from member to member because of their natural relationships. The parents have the inescapable duty to educate their children—but not vice versa; the children have the duty to obey their parents—the parents do not obey the children; the mother—not the father—bears the children, nurses them in babyhood, and is thus their first educator, hence daughters have a prior right to education over sons and, as the Guardian’s secretary has written on his behalf: “The task of bringing up a Bahá’í child, as emphasized time and again in Bahá’í Writings, 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 which a child first receives through his mother constitutes the strongest foundation for his future development” 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. This principle of the husband’s responsibility to provide for and protect the family can be seen applied also in the law of intestacy which provides that the family’s dwelling place passes, on the father’s death, not to his widow, but to his eldest son; the son at the same time has the responsibility to care for his mother. (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand, December 28, 1980, quoted in *Lights of Guidance* 218–19)

Thus, if the term “head” of the family be used in a Bahá’í context to designate the father, it must be understood to have none of the conventional authoritarian implications that the term heretofore has so often connoted, because in the Bahá’í family, the husband does not have any authority, privilege, or status that the wife does not share equally:

The atmosphere within a Bahá’í family as within the community as a whole, should express “the keynote of the Cause of God” which, the beloved Guardian has stated, “is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation.” (*Lights of Guidance* 224–25)

Or to understand the term in relation to the concept of complementarity, the term “head” in the Bahá’í context designates the nature of the husband’s function, not a hierarchy of status:

Indeed, to use the human temple as the example, if the husband is the head, the wife can well be regarded as the heart of the family. When the husband and the wife work cooperatively and complementarily, the well-being, health and proper functioning of the unity can be ensured. (Unpublished letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 16 May 1982)

The House of Justice has stated previously, in response to a question from a believer, that the use of the term “head” does not confer superiority upon the husband, nor does it give him special rights to undermine the rights of the other members of the family. It has also stated that if agreement cannot be reached following loving consultation, “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”; this is in marked contrast to the conventional use of the term “head” with which is associated, frequently, the unfettered right of making decisions when agreement cannot be reached between husband and wife. (Unpublished letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 11 January 1988)

In short, regardless of what appellations we use for family members, authority is still equally distributed between the husband and wife, and, in fact, the primacy of duties is attributed to the mother, both with regard to her having first rights to education and in relation to her essential worth to human society:

The woman is indeed of the greater importance to the race. She has the greater burden and the greater work. Look at the vegetable and the animal worlds. The palm which carries the fruit is the tree most prized by the date grower. (*‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 102–3)

Therefore, though the duties in the Bahá’í family relate in certain circumstances to gender, there is no intent in any of this that the woman’s role be subordinate or inferior. Quite the opposite is the case, though clearly Bahá’í gender roles can only be fully understood and effected “in the context of Bahá’í society, not in that of past or present social norms” (Universal House of Justice in *Women* 41–42).

Even with our present limited insights about the future evolution of Bahá’í community life, we would do well to note at least one major characteristic of these gender distinctions with regard to Bahá’í relationships and institutions. These differences seem to result from circumstantial and physiological fact. They are not in any way attributable to distinctions in human capacities or powers. To confirm this fact, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out that in a sane, just, and healthy society women will have full status and function in every human endeavor:

In no movement will they be left behind. Their rights with men are equal in degree. They will enter all the administrative branches of politics. They will attain in all such a degree as will be considered the very highest station of the world of humanity and will take part in all affairs. (*Paris Talks* 182)

With this clear statement of the equality of women and men, let us consider a distinction of duties that seems unrelated to matters of rearing children—the crucial matter of membership on the Universal House of Justice. How can we not infer from this distinction of function a sense of the woman as less capable in some as yet unknown capacity? If we approach this issue by asking ourselves what it is that qualifies men that does not qualify women, or the converse, what capabilities do women not have that men have, then we have already strayed from the logic and integrity of the Bahá’í paradigm. Once we have established that there is absolutely no distinction in human capacity between men and women, such questions automatically become illogical and unfounded. We can infer as much from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá statement that “ere long” the wisdom of this distinction will be “manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon” (*Selections* 80). We may presume that at such a time we will exclaim, as have the women of Iran regarding ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s advice to them, “This was indeed supreme wisdom!” (*Women* 7). In the meantime, we must necessarily confine our speculation to answers that deal with circumstantial explanations, since the reason can have nothing to do with gender *per se*, an inference absolutely confirmed by the fact that women are ordained to serve on every other Bahá’í institutional and administrative body.

Even if we accept that there is a special logic and just explanation for every gender-based distinction of function in the Bahá’í community (the wisdom of each of which we will in time behold), what can we conclude about the nature of gender itself quite apart from the assignment of duties? Which attributes ascribed to women and men are real, and which are artificially derived from antiquated notions of status and function?

Most probably we must conclude that for the present we cannot know with certitude anything much about true sex-determined traits in the human species, since we approach such questions from the perspective of our own limited background and biases and since the emergence of valid and healthy distinctions, whatever they may turn out to be, must await a social context that is itself conducive to fostering such distinctions. In some passages ‘Abdu’l-Bahá seems to imply inherent and permanent gender traits. He states that “woman has greater moral courage than the man; she has also special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger and crisis” (*‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 102–3), that the woman is “more tender-hearted, more receptive, her intuition is more

intense" (*Paris Talks* 161), and that "in sciences and arts, in virtues and perfections ye shall become equal to man, and as regards tenderness of heart and the abundance of mercy and sympathy ye are superior" (Bahá'u'lláh cited in *Paris Talks* 184). Of course, these distinctions may be appropriate only to our present circumstance wherein men have largely lost a sense of their so-called feminine traits, but it is interesting that in each of these distinctions, the feminine attributes cited are viewed not as signs of weakness or as alternative virtues, but as additional and as indications of superiority.

We may find one helpful key to understanding more generally this principle of co-equal complementarity in the metaphorical appellation Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá used in addressing women. On the one hand, They sometimes employed the epithet "leaves"—Bahíyyih Khánum was titled "The Greatest Holy Leaf." Certain men, on the other hand, have been designated as "branches" and "twigs." If the tree represents the attributes of God given phenomenal form, or the *Anisa* (the Tree of Life), or possibly the human race itself, what is the relationship between the branch and the leaf? Is one superior to the other, one more vital than the other in the thriving of the tree?

Their functions are distinct yet reciprocal and co-equal. Each is necessary for the survival of the other, even as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has observed that the husband and wife "are two helpmates, two intimate friends, who should be concerned about the welfare of each other" (*Selections* 122). Furthermore, it is only when both function so as to complement the other that the tree can prosper. The branch channels raw fluids and nutrients to the leaf (perhaps as the father of a household provides the sheer financial wherewithal for the family), and the leaf takes that potential and through photosynthesis changes this raw substance into kinetic chemical energy. As we know, photosynthesis takes place because the leaf is capable of using sunlight, and in the scriptures, sunlight symbolizes spiritual and intellectual guidance. Metaphorically, then, the appellation "leaf" seems to designate the woman as the key instrument by which the enlightenment and evolution of human society takes place, possibly because it is she who by instructing the children translates the potentialities of the Revelation into kinetic virtues.

Finally, we are faced with the existential dilemma of trying to live in two worlds at the same time, one that is dying and suffering the pangs of that death, and the other world not yet fully born. We are challenged, therefore, to discover for ourselves the elusive and constantly changing point of balance between trying on the one hand to respond courageously to present injustices and, on the other hand, attempting to fashion, however embryonically, the society envisioned in the Bahá'í Commonwealth, which alone can ultimately elucidate and fully implement the equality of women and men. Of course, this is a dilemma we face with every social problem, since Bahá'ís perceive an inescapable relationship between abstract virtues and the expression of those verities in the edifice of human society, as well as a social ecology wherein no single issue can be resolved piecemeal as an isolated or autonomous pathology. For example, we cannot curtail drug abuse until we create a society sufficiently healthy that it no longer desires to escape from the realities of its existence. In the same way, we can with only limited effectiveness pursue the equality of women and men until we fashion a just and healthy social context to nurture that organic relationship:

The principle of the equality between women and men, like the other teachings of the Faith, can be effectively and universally established among the friends when it is pursued in conjunction with all the other aspects of Bahá'í life. (Universal House of Justice in *Women* 58)

Put another way, our goal is to establish a healthy human society, something that can only be accomplished when the full potential of women are unleashed. But health is not simply the absence of disease; it is the presence of a vital energy and direction. In Noah's day the true workers for social justice were not those so immersed in pursuing what they deemed to be their own best interest that they were deaf to the Prophet's guidance and admonitions, strange as his advice may have seemed at the time, but those noble few who listened and believed and labored with Him to fashion board by board the Ark of their own salvation.

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