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The Office for the Advancement of Women 

The Office for the Advancement of Women, and UNIFEM



“The Faith can now begin persuasively to represent itself as a significant global influence promoting the emergence of world peace, gradually overcoming any impression of being merely another sectarian group carrying out propaganda.”

Universal House of Justice 1994

ONE OF THE UNITED NATIONS' agencies with which the Bahá'í International Community's Office for the Advancement of Women in New York is closely associated is the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which was created in 1976. The needs of women in the developing world were underlined at the First World Conference on Women, held in Mexico in 1975, and were recognised by the General Assembly with the inauguration of a voluntary fund to provide financial and technical assistance to innovative programmes and strategies that promote women's human rights and economic security.

UNIFEM is an autonomous organisation which works in close association with the UN Development Programme and relies upon voluntary contributions from Member States, foundation grants, private donations and the fund-raising activities of national committees such as UNIFEM-UK.

Those Bahá'ís who were privileged to attend the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 came into close contact with many women from these developing countries and thus were able better to understand the problems which face them. Since that time, interest in UNIFEM-UK has grown and several British Bahá'í women are supporting the projects initiated by this agency of the United Nations.

In June, Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN, visited London with his wife, Nane, who is a Patron of UNIFEM, and she asked to meet with the Chairman and some members of the UNIFEM-UK committee. The meeting took place in the prestigious Map Room at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Whitehall and she expressed an interest in the wide variety of activities of those she met. Lois Hainsworth, as Chairman of UNIFEM-UK, (and also Commissioner for the Office for the Advancement of Women), was able to speak to her at some length about the work of UNIFEM and also the Association of Bahá'í Women UK (ABW).

Lois Hainsworth (left) with Nane Annan

The areas where UNIFEM-UK is most active are Cambridge, Edinburgh, Stratford upon Avon, Yorkshire and Northern Ireland

and there are individual members all over the country. The Association of Bahá'í Women Northern Ireland has been working closely with UNIFEM for many years and the ABWs in the other areas have been encouraged to do the same.



In the recent statement from the National Spiritual Assembly regarding External Affairs, and quoting from a statement from the Universal House of Justice 1994, the following points were mentioned and can be borne in mind when seeking to work with organisations such as UNIFEM-UK.

Lois Hainsworth (left) with Nane Annan

“To influence the processes towards world peace it will also be necessary to engage like-minded non-Bahá'ís in our activities, inviting them to work with us and offering to work with them, as appropriate. Occasions should be provided for such individuals to study certain aspects of the Faith which relate to topics of particular interest to them, so as to enable them to express Bahá'í ideas to the world in their own way.”

Obviously women already working in UNIFEM have shown commitment to many core principles of the Faith and as such a desirable development would be for local Associations of Bahá'í Women to offer opportunities to work together as indicated in the passage above.

“Apart from the general public itself, the two influential constituencies which will be the particular concerns of our public information programme are:

1. private enterprise (including corporations, business associations, business publications, etc.) and
2. organisations of social change. These include national and international non-governmental organisations, as well as other types of civic associations and movements whose interests parallel in some degree those of the Faith.”

In aiming to engage and sustain the interest of receptive circles in the audiences mentioned, the programme will seek to express the relevant Bahá'í teachings in terms these segments of society will understand and value. For this reason conceptual initiatives will drive public information activities. Such initiatives should give particular attention to ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation of the central role that knowledge plays in human life and human society: that it is the process of generating and applying knowledge that lies at the heart of civilisation. The objective will be to assist audiences to appreciate that social advancement, including economic, political, and social change, flows from it.

One of the means set out by the Universal House of Justice to achieve this influence on the decision making processes necessary to bring about world peace is: “*assisting deserving and like-minded groups and organisations to realise their objectives.*” Consequently working with organisations such as UNIFEM-UK can be seen as part of this process. Although individuals are of course able to become members and work with individual initiative as they desire, wherever possible contact with UNIFEM should be through local Associations of Bahá'í Women. In this way the UK programme of public information in the area of the advancement of women will continue its work in furtherance of the guidance from the Universal House of Justice:

“... the programme will explore not merely a body of challenging ideas, but the unique social workshop that the global Bahá'í community today represents. By exploiting the unity that underlies Bahá'í history, teachings, world-view and community development, public information activities can give increased force to a message whose relevance to contemporary need is already becoming apparent to a wide audience.”

Should anyone wish for further information on UNIFEM please contact:

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or for ways in which an ABW can work with UNIFEM please contact:

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