

# **Gender Equality based on the Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, and its Application in Southern Africa**

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## **Introduction**

"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 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."

This position, taken from a statement on peace written by the Universal House of Justice in 1985, reiterates the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh that society must reorganize its life to give practical expression to the principle of equality between women and men.

Since its inception nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, the Bahá'í Faith has taught the equality of the sexes. Indeed, the Bahá'í Faith is the only independent world religion whose Founder has stated unequivocally that women and men are equal.

"Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God," said Bahá'u'lláh.

In accordance with this teaching, the worldwide Bahá'í community has been at the forefront of the movement to advance the rights of women for more than a century. And the Bahá'í approach, which advocates full equality and a firm sense of partnership between women and men, is increasingly recognized as being on the cutting edge of women's issues worldwide [1].

## **The nature of prejudice**

Prejudice is usually the prejudgment of a person's ability and potential based on some unrelated physical characteristic such as colour of skin, tribe, race, religion or gender. It is hard to find any argument ever advanced to perpetuate male dominance that does not

have a counterpart in racism. Since it has been established that "racism retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts its perpetrators, and blights human progress," the same can be said about prejudice based on gender. This is particularly true since the worldwide number of the victims of prejudice based on gender is potentially much larger than the number of the victims of any particular racial prejudice.

According to the Bahá'í writings the establishment of world peace is conditional on the removal of prejudices of all kinds:

"The primary question to be resolved is how the present world, with its entrenched pattern of conflict, can change to a world in which harmony and cooperation will prevail. World order can be founded only on an unshakable consciousness of the oneness of mankind, a spiritual truth that all the human sciences confirm. Anthropology, physiology, psychology, recognise only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life. Recognition of this truth requires abandonment of prejudice - prejudice of every kind - race, class, colour, creed, nation, sex, and degree of material civilization, everything that enables people to consider themselves superior to others. Acceptance of the oneness of mankind is the first fundamental prerequisite for reorganization and administration of the world as one country, the home of mankind. Universal acceptance of this spiritual principle is essential to any successful attempt to establish world peace." [2].

"So it will come to pass that when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics, war will cease." [3].

### **The role of religion in advancement of women**

Traditionally, religion has been one of the most powerful sources of both vision and values. Every religion, particularly in its early stages, has evoked a new vision for society, articulated values consonant with that vision, and inspired both personal and institutional transformation. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that religion has also been a source of division and social fragmentation. Indeed the record of religions in promoting the advancement of women has been uneven. While, typically, in the early years of their existence, religions have tended to encourage the participation of women, historical evidence suggests a gradual tendency among religious institutions over time to establish practices and support attitudes that impede the development of women's potential.

Since religion is such a potentially powerful force for progress, religious leaders and people of faith everywhere are urged to step forward as lovers of humanity to promote those eternal unifying principles - or spiritual values - that can inspire in both individuals and governments the will to implement the Agenda for Equality.

Foremost is the principle of the oneness of humankind. It lies at the heart of the exhortation that we should treat others as we wish to be treated, an ethical standard upheld in some form by every religion. To establish justice peace and order in an interdependent world, this principle must guide all interactions, including those between men and women. If the treatment of women were scrutinized in the light of this ethical standard, we would doubtless move beyond many traditional, religious and cultural practices.

The personal transformation required for true equality will undoubtedly be difficult for men and women alike. Both must relinquish all attachment to guilt and blame and courageously assume responsibility for their own part in transforming the societies in which they live. Men must use their influence, particularly in the civil, political and religious institutions they control, to promote the systematic inclusion of women, not out of condescension or presumed self-sacrifice but out of the belief that the contributions of women are required for society to progress. Women, for their part, must become educated and step forward into all arenas of human activity, contributing their particular qualities, skills and experience to the social, economic and political equation. Women and men together will ensure the establishment of world peace and sustainable development of the planet.

Religious leaders and people of faith everywhere have a special responsibility to reaffirm those eternal principles that unite and bind together the hearts and release the capacities of every soul. Galvanized by the spirit and vision of the oneness of the human family, women and men together can create a peaceful, just and prosperous world in which to nurture the generations to come. [4]

### **Does suppression of equality benefit men?**

We live in such an interdependent world that the advantage of each part can best be achieved through the advantage of the whole. Men cannot ultimately benefit by living in a world that half of its population is deprived from developing their full potential. What is good for women is good for humankind.

In this regard, the Bahá'í writings present the following:

Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very important element. 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 [5].

### **The First Educator**

Women, as mothers, are the first educators of children. It is a scientifically established fact that many of our attitudes, habits, outlooks, hopes and aspirations have their roots in the training we have received early in childhood. If women are deprived from developing

their full potential, the progress of civilization will be impeded and future generations will be adversely affected.

### **Is affirmative action unjust?**

Affirmative action is an attempt to redress the injustices of the past. Specific efforts to provide the necessary opportunities for the development of the potentialities of those who have been left behind, due to age-old injustices, can hardly be considered unjust. On the other hand, allocations of such positions of authority that require specific training and skill without providing the opportunities to acquire those necessary prerequisites can lead to such performance as to provide the ammunition for the critics of change.

### **The role of tradition and culture**

Tradition and culture represent the wisdom of the past. Equally important are the hopes and aspirations for the future. For a dynamic society to embrace progress, it is necessary to accept the element of change. This change should be guided by the progress in science and religion. There are many traditional and cultural principles and acts whose wisdom and reason for existence have been removed by the inevitable changes in society. There can be no justification to suppression of the rights of women as the weaker sex in a society that intellectual ability is more important to progress than physical strength. Cultural considerations may define specific roles for men and women in families, but no one will benefit by denying the rights of an individual to education, training and experience to develop one's full potential.

On a lighter note, it is possible to reinterpret deep-rooted traditional convictions to support the realities of our time: "Woman was created from the rib of man not from his head to be above him, nor his feet to be walked upon, but from his side to be equal, near to his arm to be protected and close to his heart to be loved."

### **Gender equality in Bahá'í communities in Southern Africa**

Bahá'í institutions in Southern Africa promote various educational efforts for women, and work to raise the consciousness of both women and men about this fundamental equality. Many of its schools, learning centres, and grassroots social and economic development projects specifically include the promotion of women's advancement into their curricula or agendas. The principle of consultation as defined by the Bahá'í Faith and practiced in Bahá'í communities at local and national levels has contributed significantly to the establishment of gender equality in Bahá'í families and communities. As a case study, a particular Bahá'í inspired social and economic development project in Zambia, the William Mmutle Masetle Foundation, will be described below with particular attention to its contribution to gender equality [6].

## **William Mmutle Masetlha Foundation, Zambia**

The William Mmutle Masetlha Foundation [7] is a non-profit non-governmental organization with its seat located on 200 hectares of agricultural land situated in Chisamba, about 80 kilometers north of Lusaka. While its origins date back to 1983, the Foundation was organized under its present structure in 1995. The major programs of the Foundation include the Capstone Education Program, the Health Education Program, the Agriculture Research Program, the Banani International Secondary School, and a general training program to develop capabilities for service. Capstone is a village tutorial program that seeks to consolidate the primary education of junior youth and enable them to contribute to the progress of their communities and achieve a secondary level education. The Health Program aims to develop human resources that can provide primary health care and education in their communities. The Agriculture Research Program consists of modest research and demonstration projects on sustainable agriculture. The Banani Secondary School, a residential academic school for girls, was established in 1993 and has an enrolment of some 125 students in grades 8 through 12. In all the activities of this Foundation the Bahá'í principle of equality of the sexes, indeed, the preference of the girl child in education if a choice has to be made, can be observed in action.

### **History of the Foundation**

Through the initiative of a small group of Bahá'ís, a proposal was submitted to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Zambia in October 1983 to establish an institute that would offer regularly scheduled training courses covering the following three major areas: study of spiritual development; agriculture; and handicrafts and vocational skills. A typical course, held over a period of two to four months, included daily study of moral teachings, lectures and workshops on agriculture, basic hygiene, literacy training, metal working skills, and the opportunity to apply what they learned. For example, in collaboration with the Zambian government, the participants helped to establish demonstration plots in neighbouring villages and maintain a garden that produced fresh vegetables for the participants in the training sessions.

A few courses on spiritual enrichment, literacy and numeracy, parenting skills, agriculture and hygiene were held during 1987 to 1992. This was followed by a literacy project carried out in collaboration with the Zambian government using the "Literacy for Empowerment" materials that were developed by the Bahá'í community in Kenya. Funded in part by the government of Sweden, this project resulted in more than 80 facilitators teaching literacy classes reaching about 1,600 participants. These courses were conducted in Chisamba, and a few classes were held in Mwinilunga, Northwestern Province, where the majority of the Bahá'ís lived.

In 1985 regular classes on hygiene were included in the institute's training program to which women were invited to participate, and weekly classes were conducted for women

in nearby villages. During the period 1987 to 1990, in collaboration with the Bahá'í National Social and Economic Development Committee, the institute offered three types of training courses for both men and women: Community Health Educators, Primary Health Care for Rural Women, and refresher courses for Community Health Educators. About 150 persons from the Northwestern and Central Provinces participated in these annual courses for community health workers. Of the 30 individuals trained in 1988, 21 were still serving as community health educators in 1993 when a four-year project, funded by the Canadian Public Health Agency (CPHA), conducted as part of Phase 2 of the Canadian International Immunization Program (CPIIP2), was initiated. The institute produced special training materials based on a book developed by the Bahá'í community of Kenya for mothers, "Raising Healthy Children," to be used in conjunction with the UNICEF booklet, "Facts for Life." After the project funding ended in 1996, consultations were held to learn from the experiences of the Bahá'í communities in providing health education to village people in all four participating countries (Uganda, Kenya, Burkina, and Zambia). This reflection on action led to the William Masetlha Foundation spearheading a project to develop a four-level training program for community health educators that aim to integrate spiritual principles with scientific knowledge.

Preliminary investigations in 1988 led to the decision to open a residential school for girls, which would function under the auspices of the institute. Construction of the Banani International Secondary School began in June 1990. On 31 January 1993, classes opened with 65 students, and at the official inauguration in 1996, there were 120 students. Student enrollment has remained close to that number each year since then. In 1999 the Foundation initiated a feasibility study regarding a second phase of expanding the school's facilities from 150 to 300 students. The years since the opening of the school have seen the development of a science laboratory, library, multimedia computer lab, swimming pool, art center, and the purchase of a school bus.

In addition to following the regular academic curriculum, the students can choose to participate in a wide range of service projects, which have included: conducting a first aid course, growing vegetables for an orphanage, building a children's playground, producing educational dramas, tutoring at the village schools, and participating in health education programs in the villages. For example, Radio BISS (for Banani International Secondary School), inaugurated in 1998, is comprised of a group of students who perform in a series of plays that highlight problems affecting children and women. The performances, which seem to have a profound influence in raising awareness of their audiences regarding the challenges facing Zambian youth, have been conducted in several local schools and at the 1998 Zambian International Arts Festival. As a service to the Foundation's staff members, a primary school began functioning in 1995 with students in grades one to three. Due to the closing of a couple of local primary schools in the area, the Banani Primary School began accepting students from the surrounding community in 1999.

Reflection on the experience gained in designing and implementing an educational program that would assist large numbers of people to develop their capabilities for

service led to the creation, in 1995, of the National Core Group functioning under the auspices of the Foundation to oversee the general training program and to spearhead the use of a sequence of courses developed by the Ruhi Institute in Colombia. These courses aim to raise up human resources for service to the community beginning with expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community itself. During the initial stages, training programs leading to the development of tutors for the courses were held in Chisamba, Central Province, and in at least four other Provinces: Northwestern, Southern, Copperbelt, and Northern. Gradually, the capacity for delivering the courses at the local level increased so that by November 1999 at least 150 participants were studying Book 1 in 25 study circles throughout the country. Concerted efforts to translate the materials have resulted in the first book in the series being available for use in the following languages: Bemba, Tonga, Lunda, Kaonde, and Nyanja. Translations of Books 2 and 3 have begun, and translation of Book 2 into Lunda and Bemba was completed in August 1999.

With encouragement from the Office of Social and Economic Development, a training course to prepare youth to participate in a year of service was developed. Youth from anywhere in the world wishing to serve in southern African countries were invited to participate, but the primary focus is to raise up Zambian youth to dedicate a year of service in Zambia. The first course was held for two weeks in August 1990, a second four-week course with nine participants was held in August 1992, and there were eight participants in the course held in September 1993. During 1998-1999, 13 youth (3 from Zambia and 10 from 8 other countries) participated in a five-week Youth Year of Service Orientation and Training course in preparation for their year of service in Zambia. Some of the areas of service are teaching children's classes, organizing drama and music groups, and serving as a tutor for the general training program.

In collaboration with the Colombian-based Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC), the Foundation's Capstone Program, initiated in 1997, is developing curricular materials for rural youth who have completed primary school to prepare themselves for service to their community and to further their education. Research regarding the needs of the Zambian rural youth suggests five categories of capabilities: language, mathematics, science, community service, and vocation. Curricular materials in these categories and a course to prepare village volunteers to serve as tutors of the Program are planned. By November 1999, two language units were completed, and work had begun on the math unit and the tutor's course. Field-testing of the Capstone Program materials was carried out with a total of 19 students in Nachiyaba during 1999.

## **Lines of Action of the Foundation**

### Health Education Program

The Foundation's activities in the area of health are focused on developing a training program that will raise up individuals to serve as community health educators in rural communities. The area of implementation during 2001 to 2004 encompasses villages where there are functioning Local Spiritual Assemblies in four remote regions of Zambia: North-western, Northern, Eastern, and Southern. It is envisioned that courses will be offered at four levels. The first level training is for educators of basic health themes for family and community members through a systematic program delivered in local languages in various settings, such as schools, women's groups, and church groups. The second level will focus on training community health educators to stimulate and implement actions related to hygiene, nutrition and local community participation in the Ministry of Health campaigns and activities such as immunization, growth monitoring and potable water. Training at this level includes additional specialized courses related to HIV/AIDS, women's health, child health, and nutrition. The third level of courses aims to develop community health educators to serve as facilitators in delivering level one family health education courses. The courses at the fourth level aim to empower Community Health Educators to establish local health committees, or work with existing ones, so that the local community may address greater issues of community health. The first module in this new series of curricular elements, the "Family Health Educator Training Manual" is ready for field-testing. Materials needed for training tutors of these courses are also being developed.

### Capstone Education Program

In consultation with the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre, the Foundation established the Capstone Program, which is designed to serve a crucial role in opening the door to an expanded program of Bahá'í-inspired education for youth throughout the African continent. FUNDAEC's secondary tutorial program, Sistema Academica Tutorial (SAT), which has served rural populations in Colombia and surrounding countries reaching more than 30,000 students in Latin America, could serve even more in Africa. However, preliminary studies in Zambia have shown that the content of the SAT program is too difficult for those who could benefit from it even if they have succeeded in completing their primary education. Therefore, the first stage of SAT, the Capstone Program, has been defined as the development and establishment of a tutorial program that increases the capacity of rural youth in Zambia to pursue a secondary level education. Its purpose will, however, go beyond preparation for entrance into a secondary education program. A far more important purpose will be to guide the adolescent students through the critical passage from childhood to youth while developing the capacities to live a fruitful life. The Foundation is seeking official recognition of the Capstone Program through the Institute of Economic and Social Research, University of Zambia.

### Banani International Secondary School

The Banani International Secondary School had an enrollment of 125 students in grades 8 to 12 during the 2000-2001 school year. It has adopted the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate curriculum, supplemented by courses on world religions and character development. The school has students from Christian,

Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Bahá'í backgrounds and encourages a universal, global outlook with respect for all cultures, races and religions. In addition to recruiting Zambian staff members, the school has employed individuals from Canada, Uganda, the United States, South Africa, Britain, Malawi, and India. Additionally, the school benefits from the volunteer services provided by youth who come from all over the world to assist in teaching classes, help with administrative work, or live with the students as dorm parents. Serving the needs of primarily the children of the Foundation's staff members, the Banani Primary School has developed a grade one through seven curriculum based on Bahá'í principles and a modified Montessori School approach. Still occupying only one classroom, the school had 10 students during the 2000-2001 academic year. The primary school students are encouraged to take part in service projects, namely assisting the nearby Liteta School students to improve their reading skills.

## **Conclusions**

As a result of the distinctive application of the principle of consultation and gender equality in Bahá'í communities at local and National levels, noticeable positive changes of behaviour towards the fundamental principle of unity of humankind are developing.

It has been established that there are no grounds that justify the perpetuation of male dominance. The teachings of the Bahá'í Faith may be reiterated in the following statement:

Know thou that the distinction between male and female is an exigency of the physical world and hath no connection with the spirit; for the spirit and the world of the spirit are sanctified above such exigencies, and wholly beyond the reach of such changes as befall the physical body in the contingent world. In former ages, men enjoyed ascendancy over women because bodily might reigned supreme and the spirit was subject to its dominion. In this radiant age, however, since the power of the spirit hath transcended that of the body and assumed its ascendancy, authority and dominion over the human world, this physical distinction hath ceased to be of consequence; and as the sway and influence of the spirit have become apparent, women have come to be full equal of men. Today, therefore, there is no respect or circumstance in which a person's sex provideth grounds for the exercise of either discrimination or favour [8].

## **References**

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[3] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, Talks delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His visit to the United States and Canada in 1912. Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992.

[4] Bahá'í International Community, BIC Document #95-0913

[5] Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p.133.

[6] The William Masetlha Foundation is featured in a report, submitted by the Bahá'í International Community Office for the Advancement of Women in April 1996, which appears in "The Emerging Role of NGOs in African Sustainable Development", published by the United Nations and distributed to participants in the Mid-Term Review of the United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s (UN-NADAF). This report can be viewed at the following Web site: <http://www.bic-un.Bahá'í.org/96-0430.htm>.

[7] "The Masetlha Foundation: Health, Literacy, and Education in Zambia," *The Bahá'í World 1996-97*, pp. 221-226.

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