

Essay/Essai/Ensayo

## Promoting the Equality of Women and Men: The Role of the Covenant\*

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### Abstract

This essay explores the way the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh influences implementation of the principle of the equality of women and men. The roles of the Covenant in stimulating creative thought and promoting social change are discussed. General features of the application of Bahá'í law are examined, including progressive clarification, progressive application, the principle of convergence, and the exercise of restraint. All of these aspects are crucial in ensuring the eradication of the barriers to the attainment of the new society described in the document *Who Is Writing the Future?* They also guarantee that the change is enduring, and that it retains the diversity and freedom necessary for creative thought to flourish. These general principles are applied to an analysis of the implementation of the equality of the sexes, including the role of women in marriage and family life, in education, and in participation in the wider society.

### Résumé

Dans cet essai, l'auteure explore comment l'Alliance de Bahá'u'lláh influence la mise en œuvre du principe de l'égalité de la femme et de l'homme. Elle examine le rôle que joue l'Alliance en stimulant la pensée créatrice et en favorisant la transformation sociale. Les caractéristiques générales de l'application de la loi bahá'íe sont examinées, notamment la clarification progressive, l'application progressive, le principe de convergence, et la pratique de la modération. Tous ces aspects sont cruciaux pour assurer l'élimination de ce qui s'oppose à l'établissement de la nouvelle société décrite dans l'ouvrage *Écrire l'avenir*. Ces aspects assurent également la pérennité de la transformation sociale, et font en sorte qu'elle protège la diversité et la liberté requises pour permettre à la pensée créatrice de s'exprimer librement. Ces principes généraux sont ensuite appliqués à une analyse de l'égalité des sexes, y compris le rôle de la femme dans le mariage et la vie familiale, en matière d'éducation, et sa participation à la société dans son ensemble.

### Resumen

Este ensayo sondea la manera en que el Convenio de Bahá'u'lláh ejerce su efecto sobre la implementación del principio de la igualdad de la mujer y el hombre. Se plantea el papel que tiene el Convenio en el estímulo de los pensamientos creativos y en el adelanto del cambio social. Se examinan los aspectos generales de la aplicación de la ley bahá'í, incluyendo la clarificación progresiva, la aplicación progresiva, el principio de la convergencia, y el ejercicio de contenimiento. Todos estos aspectos son críticos para asegurar la erradicación de las barreras para obtener la nueva sociedad explicada en el documento titulado *¿Quién está escribiendo el futuro?* Aseguran también que el cambio perdure, y que mantenga la diversidad y libertad necesarias para que florezcan los pensamientos creativos. Estos principios generales están aplicados a un análisis de la implementación de la igualdad de los sexos, incluyendo el papel de la mujer en el matrimonio y la vida familiar, en la educación, y en la participación en una sociedad amplia.

### Introduction

This essay seeks to explore the manner in which the Bahá'í teachings foster the practical application of the equality of women and men. It aims to show that the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh—which is a vital element of these teachings—plays an indispensable role in this process of application. The article begins by examining in detail some general aspects of the way in which the provisions of the Covenant serve to promote change and to stimulate creative thought. The points emerging from this analysis are then applied more specifically to the implementation of the equality of women and men.

## **The Process of Change**

One of the major themes of *Who is Writing the Future? Reflections on the Twentieth Century* is the necessity for change, for a shift in consciousness and a transformation of values and habits of mind. The document refers to an increasing consensus that some form of fundamental reevaluation of the condition of society is required as a prerequisite to defining the changes necessary to shape the social order in the twenty-first century. It identifies what is described as “the next, inescapable stage in the process of social evolution” (Bahá’í International Community 5) and elaborates on what this entails. It entails “laying the foundations of a global society that can reflect the oneness of human nature” (5) and thus effecting a tremendous change in ways of thinking and acting which have been accepted as normal for centuries or even millennia. Given the need to challenge habits and attitudes that are considered “as normative and unchangeable” (11), the document cautions that such change will not come about easily, observing: “As the events of the twentieth century have already demonstrated, patterns of habit and attitude which have taken root over thousands of years are not abandoned either spontaneously or in response simply to education or legislative action” (14).

It is in contributing to the process of change that religion can play a vital role, since its central purpose is to exert a positive influence on such attitudes and behavior. Unfortunately religion has not always played a constructive part in effecting change. So often it has been conservative and inflexible, committed to the preservation of the status quo and resistant to change out of fear that its position and influence would be undermined if social change were permitted. Change has also, in many instances, been a source of disunity or social tension. In some cases, success in accomplishing change has spawned a new orthodoxy that is determined to resist any modification to the practices it has, at an earlier time, labored to establish. Nevertheless, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out, “the times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place” (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, Introduction 4–5), a view that resonates with Bahá’u’lláh’s statement about the purpose of human life, that “All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization” (*Gleanings* 215).

When a religion seeks to promote change in values and patterns of behavior, three challenges arise. They are: (1) to actually accomplish such a change when it requires discarding practices which have been followed for centuries and which are tied into a traditional culture that has the weight of history behind it; (2) having accomplished the change, to maintain the changed conditions on an enduring foundation which is strong enough to resist endeavors—conscious or unconscious—to return to the old ways, and which cannot be overturned by a backlash reaction from people unsettled by a too-rapid rate of change; and (3) to allow for the creative expression of diversity of thought and practice—within reasonable limits—to accommodate the wide range of situations in which people live, and to avoid stifling individuality by specifying required behavior in minute detail.

The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh is uniquely endowed with features that enable the Bahá’í Faith to meet these three challenges. Without the provisions of the Covenant, the Faith would not be able to fulfil its objectives by contributing to the new world outlined in *Who is Writing the Future?* An implication of the uniqueness of this Covenant is that the Bahá’í Faith is empowered to accomplish a degree of change unprecedented in religious history.

## **The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh**

The principal features of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh and its roles in the stimulation of creative thought and the promotion of change are outlined below.

The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh provides for the appointment of His eldest son, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as His successor in authority as the Head of the Faith and Center of the Covenant, with well-defined functions that include authoritative exposition of the Baha’i teachings. In His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá continued this pattern of explicit written provisions concerning authority by formally ordaining the institutions of the Baha’i Administrative Order, to which reference had hitherto been made in the Writings of Baha’u’llah.

The Baha’i Administrative Order has as its principal institutions the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice. Shoghi Effendi, the eldest grandson of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, was appointed by Him as Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith and performed the prescribed functions—which included that of authoritative interpretation—until his death in 1957. The Universal House of Justice, which was first elected in 1963, and which renews its membership by election every five years, is now the Head of the Bahá’í Faith. Included within its clearly prescribed functions are the authority to enact laws and ordinances on matters that are not expressly set out in the Bahá’í Writings and the authority to elucidate questions that are obscure in the teachings of Baha’u’llah and that are causing differences.

Briefly, the present-day Bahá’í Administrative Order, functioning under the direction of the Universal House of Justice, consists, on the one hand, of elected National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, which guide and coordinate the activities of the Bahá’í community. The Administrative Order also includes, on the other hand, eminent and devoted believers who are appointed to provide a vital counseling and advisory function to the Spiritual

Assemblies and to the believers generally. It should be noted that there is no priesthood in the Bahá'í Faith and no ecclesiastical structure.

### **Creativity and the Covenant**

It is clear to any who study carefully the Bahá'í teachings that there are many aspects of these teachings which contribute to stimulating creative thought. The principle of independent investigation of truth, the encouragement to eradicate prejudice and superstition, and the emphasis on training the mind are a few principles which relate to this subject.

What is somewhat less appreciated is how important a role the provisions of the Covenant play in the stimulation of creative thought. One aspect of this lies in the Guardianship, which remains an essential element of the Bahá'í Administrative Order even though there is no living Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi. In addition to the ongoing relevance of the authoritative interpretations of the Guardian, the Guardianship continues to exert its influence in that no believer can claim authority for his or her understanding of the Bahá'í teachings. At the same time, there is a strong encouragement to the individual Bahá'í to strive for understanding of these teachings. As the Universal House of Justice has pointed out, "such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings," and "individual insights can be enlightening and helpful" (*Messages* 35.13).

With the restriction imposed by the Guardianship, the door is closed to the formation of groups of people following, passively and without question, the understanding of someone they regard as highly learned. Personality cults and the quasi-priestly influence of guru-like figures are avoided. Rather, there is the intellectual liberation which comes from the freedom to explore one's own understanding of the Writings, without the pressure to subscribe to whatever any other individual holds to be an accurate view.

The functioning of the Universal House of Justice also has a positive influence on creative thought. With the strong emphasis on unity in Bahá'í community life, there is the possibility that believers may feel inhibited from creative thought by a fear that they may inadvertently provoke differences in the community and thus disturb its unity. They need have no fear in this regard. One of the functions of the Universal House of Justice prescribed in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is to "deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book" (*Will and Testament* 20). This creates a safety net for those engaging in creative thought. They are liberated to explore the meaning of what Baha'u'llah has written, together with the authoritative interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, secure in the knowledge that any problems can be solved. Most differences of thought will not affect community unity, but any that do can be resolved by reference to the Universal House of Justice.

### **The Application of Bahá'í Law**

Bahá'ís believe that Baha'u'llah has brought new laws and principles which are designed to mold individual and social behavior in a way required to meet the needs of the new age we are moving into. The process of change is effected through the application of Bahá'í law to the community of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh. It should be noted that Bahá'ís do not attempt to impose their laws on those who are not members of the Bahá'í community. The Covenant plays an essential role in ensuring that the process of applying Bahá'í law occurs in such a way that the change is fundamental and enduring, and that individuality is not stifled.

### **Progressive Clarification**

One of the most interesting features of Bahá'í law is that, in many instances, the law is stated in a very general form by Bahá'u'lláh: sometimes this statement is deliberately ambiguous, with clarification provided by the subsequent authoritative interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. In other instances important details are omitted, opening the way for the Universal House of Justice to exercise its functions, assigned by the Covenant, to legislate on those matters not covered explicitly in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. A clarification of far-reaching significance is set out in the following statement of the Universal House of Justice:

In general, the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are stated succinctly. An example of this conciseness can be seen in the fact that many are expressed only as they apply to a man, but it is apparent from the Guardian's writings that, where Bahá'u'lláh has given a law as between a man and a woman, it applies *mutatis mutandis* between a woman and a man unless the context makes this impossible. (Introduction 7)

This process of progressive clarification allows for believers to gradually become used to a new form of behavior before being required to follow it more precisely when later clarification occurs. For example, when the call to form

Local Assemblies to decide on Baha'i community activities was first raised, it led to a variety of forms which differed in such basic details as the number of people to serve on the body, the number of votes each member had, and the eligibility of women to serve alongside men on it. Gradually these issues were clarified until the present uniformity of practice was achieved.

The legislation of the Universal House of Justice is supplementary to the Text of Bahá'u'lláh and does not contradict it. This legislation is, from the terms of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, subject to change by the House of Justice at a later time when it feels conditions have altered; the effect is to provide a remarkable degree of flexibility, allowing for change over an extended period of time. This flexibility avoids the Baha'i Faith becoming an agent of restraint upon progress, innovation, and social development.

Progressive clarification rests firmly on the foundation of the Covenant; without the Covenant there would be no basis for unity of agreement on the clarification, and confusion and disunity would result. Part of the price we pay for progressive clarification is that antagonists of the Faith are provided with ammunition with which to criticize the Bahá'í Faith as expedient, or changing its mind in the face of public opinion, or altering the intention of Bahá'u'lláh. These criticisms are easily refuted through reference to the provisions of the Covenant.

### **Progressive Application**

Distinct from, but often allied with, progressive clarification is the process of progressive application of Bahá'í law. The Universal House of Justice, in its introduction to the English translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, stated that "Bahá'u'lláh has provided for the progressive application of Bahá'í law" (5–6), and it refers to the principle governing the operation of this process.

Progressive application allows the central authority in the Faith, now the Universal House of Justice, to adapt the timing of the application of specific laws of the Faith to the condition of the Bahá'í community, including its cultural and religious background. This permits it to ensure that Bahá'í law is applied at a rate that does not impose extreme psychological stress on those called upon to adopt new forms of behavior; it allows for differentiation, as now occurs with certain laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas being binding only on those Iranian believers who have retained their cultural background. This flexibility contributes to an organic process of evolutionary development of the Bahá'í community, as well as facilitating a degree of change that is ultimately both fundamental and enduring.

The two processes of progressive clarification and progressive application are often intertwined. Consider, for example, the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Bahá'ís in the Western world are initially aware of them only through the summary provided by the Guardian in *God Passes By*. Their form is clarified to some extent in the publication in 1973 of *A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, and more fully in the English translation of the Most Holy Book in 1992. Even with this material, many laws remain in need of further clarification. The Universal House of Justice has foreshadowed providing this when the time comes to apply those laws not presently binding in the West, stating, "When it is deemed timely, the Bahá'í community will be advised which additional laws are binding upon believers, and any guidance or supplementary legislation necessary for their application will be provided" (Introduction 7).

Experience has shown that the action of applying a law, such as the laws of prayer, fasting, and Huqúqu'lláh, leads inevitably to a need for additional clarification as the myriad circumstances of human life are encountered. The Universal House of Justice meets this need as it deems necessary to do so, and the unfoldment of these two processes continues.

### **Convergence**

The provisions of the Bahá'í Covenant which allow for the progressive clarification of meaning and the progressive application of the teachings underpin a process which I term *the principle of convergence*. What is intended by this term? When we consider the religions that arose in the distant past, we tend to observe, with the passage of time, an increasing divergence between the teachings of the Messenger of God and the application of these teachings in the life of the community. There are several reasons for this divergence, including the following: diversity of views about what the Messenger of God said or meant, arising from the acceptance of oral statements as having validity and from the lack of common agreement on the interpretative authority to be followed; the development of an ecclesiastical structure that was gradually affected by the partisan interests of national, ethnic, or culturally-based groups seeking dominance, for example, the domination of the British upper classes in the Anglican Church; and differences of approach in dealing with the consequences of the social change engendered by the religion and in adapting religious and social practice to changed conditions.

These factors have combined to produce a multiplying effect in divergence from the teachings of the Messenger of God, with the passage of generations. They give rise periodically to calls, and even sectarian

movements, which seek to return to the initial form and to recover the initial purity; such movements are doomed to failure because of the weight of the intervening social change. They also produce a divisive counterreaction within the religious community from those apprehensive that creativity and initiative are being inhibited or restricted.

In the Bahá'í community, on the other hand, because of the provisions of the Covenant, we can confidently anticipate an ever greater convergence between the principles outlined in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and their progressive implementation in Bahá'í community life as the generations succeed each other.

How does the principle of convergence operate? An integral and essential element of Bahá'í belief is the acceptance of the authority of the institutions of the Covenant, since they trace their authority and functions to the authentic statements of Bahá'u'lláh Himself. These institutions ensure that the factors enumerated above as giving rise to divergence are eradicated. Oral statements are discounted, and authoritative interpreters are defined precisely. There is no ecclesiastical structure, and the Universal House of Justice ensures that there is unity and cohesion in the adaptation to social change. The result is that each new generation of Bahá'ís approaches the Bahá'í teachings in a form that has not become corrupted nor departed from the intentions of Bahá'u'lláh, and seeks to implement these principles with independence of spirit. Bahá'í emphasis is on individual responsibility to determine one's understanding of the teachings. The effect of the combination of these influences is to produce convergence, in which the generations of Bahá'ís more fully free themselves from cultural biases and more closely approach a fuller expression of the teachings. This, in turn, gives rise to a process orientation in Bahá'í community practice; the emphasis is placed on the launching and fostering of Bahá'í community life, secure in the knowledge that it will lead ultimately, through the operation of the Covenant, to a well-functioning community that adheres closely to the provisions of the Faith.

The operation of the principle of convergence supports the Bahá'í approach to change, recognizing that social transformation is a process of fundamental attitudinal change, to be undertaken in an evolutionary manner even in those parts of the world where there are entrenched prejudices and barriers. It places the responsibility for shaping the future in the hands of individuals and Bahá'í social institutions.

### **Restraint**

In past religious dispensations, rules and regulations have tended to proliferate with the passage of time, as the leaders make rulings on the various situations that come to their attention. In the long term, the results are quite harmful. The followers of the religions can feel suffocated by the volume of such rulings, and are tempted to use their ingenuity to find ways of circumventing them. Beyond that, the flexibility and dynamism of the religious community are diminished, and its position as an agent of social progress is compromised.

For these reasons it is of far-reaching significance that the Universal House of Justice appears to have deliberately chosen not to proceed along this path, even though it has the right to legislate on matters not covered in the Sacred Text and does not shrink from doing so when the occasion requires. This restraint is evident in the following passage taken from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice in response to a request from a Bahá'í for a precise set of regulations to cover one aspect of Bahá'í conduct not addressed explicitly in the Text:

It is neither possible nor desirable for the Universal House of Justice to set forth a set of rules covering every situation. Rather it is the task of the individual believer to determine, according to his own prayerful understanding of the Writings, precisely what his course of conduct should be in relation to situations he encounters in his daily life. If he is to fulfil his true mission in life as a follower of the Blessed Perfection, he will pattern his life according to the Teachings. The believer cannot attain this objective merely by living according to a set of rigid regulations. When his life is oriented toward service to Bahá'u'lláh, and when every conscious act is performed within this frame of reference, he will not fail to achieve the true purpose of his life. (*Compilation of Compilations* 1:118)

The mention of the undesirability of formulating detailed rules is particularly important. It means that the Bahá'í society now emerging will foster a high degree of personal responsibility and will retain that flexibility which caters to diversity—within the broad limits of obedience to the clearly formulated teachings and principles. The Faith will therefore be able to remain a creative and energizing force in the promotion of social change and in the development of the ever-advancing civilization that Bahá'u'lláh called for.

This completes the brief survey of those aspects of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh that will foster creative thought and promote enduring change of a magnitude sufficient to eradicate age-old practices unresponsive to the needs outlined in *Who is Writing the Future?*

I turn now to the application of these features of the Covenant to the implementation of principle of the equality of women and men.

### **Spiritual and Social Equality of Women and Men**

The Bahá'í Faith affirms, as an integral element of its teachings, not only that the equality of women and men must be regarded as a spiritual reality, but that this equality must now be expressed in both individual and social practice. The practice of this principle is a spiritual duty for all Bahá'ís, women and men alike. Indeed, the promulgation and implementation of the principle of the equality of the sexes throughout the world is one of the primary aims of the Bahá'í Faith. This objective can best be perceived as a fundamental element of the Bahá'í endeavor, in all parts of the planet, to foster adherence to justice as an enduring foundation for the unity, peace, and well-being of the earth and its peoples.

The Bahá'í teachings spell out a number of elements that pertain to the emancipation of women. These include the rights of women to be respected as human beings, to be accorded civil and legal rights equal to those of men, and to have these rights protected by the society at large. Bahá'u'lláh explicitly states that women enjoy “a station and rank on the same plane” (*Women* no. 2) as men. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, likewise, indicates that “Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very important element” (*Paris Talks* 40.33). He calls attention to the fact that “Divine Justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other in the eyes of Heaven” (*Paris Talks* 50.10).

The purpose here is not to try to present a detailed treatment of the various aspects of the Bahá'í teachings on women, but rather to show how important a role the Covenant plays in the process of accomplishing the fundamental and enduring change required to incorporate the practice of the equality of women and men in the life of humanity. Several themes pertinent to the equality of the sexes will be examined in order to illustrate this point.

### **Marriage and Family Life**

Some features of the Bahá'í teachings on marriage and the relationship between husband and wife will be described, starting with monogamy. It is clear that prior to the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, no Manifestation of God has prescribed monogamy. Muhammad restricted the number of wives to a maximum of four but made plurality of wives conditional on justice. When the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas were revealed, the Bahá'í community was drawn almost entirely from the Muslim society and was accustomed to polygamy. Bahá'u'lláh Himself had three wives, having contracted these marriages before the revelation of the Bahá'í laws.

As affirmed by Shoghi Effendi, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas “prescribes monogamy” (*God Passes By* 214). However this law was subject to progressive clarification and progressive application, the consequence of which was that the required change in behavior was accomplished over a period of decades—altering a practice which had been accepted as normal for thousands of years.

This progressive clarification was initiated through the statement in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: “Beware that ye take not unto yourselves more wives than two. Whoso contenteth himself with a single partner from among the maidservants of God, both he and she shall live in tranquillity” (par. 63). In the absence of any other statements, this verse could well be taken to convey the impression that bigamy was permissible. However, one was also required to take account of the statement in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas concerning the authority of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, namely, to “refer . . . whatsoever ye understand not in the Book to Him” (par. 174).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá followed the progressive approach in that initially He did not forbid marriage to a second wife but discouraged it with statements to the effect that marriage with a second wife is dependent upon justice, and the implementation of justice is extremely difficult, and it is more conducive to one’s well-being and happiness to practice monogamy. He later clarified the matter precisely in the following statement: “In accordance with the text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the law on marriage is, in reality, based on monogamy, because bigamy has been made dependent on an impossible condition.”<sup>1</sup> The process of progressive application continues even to the present day, with men who have several wives being permitted to join the Baha’i community without being required to divorce all wives but one. However, such men are not permitted to add another wife to their household.

Decision-making within the marriage relationship has also been subject to progressive clarification. Most, if not all, Baha’is in the early decades of the Faith came from backgrounds where the husband was regarded as having a dominant role in decision-making and the wife as being required to be obedient to him. In the initial statement of the teachings, emphasis was placed on preservation of unity, but the rights of all household members, including the females, were affirmed. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated: “The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained” (*Promulgation* 168). As the Bahá'í community developed in its understanding, the role of consultation was also emphasized, with the Universal House of Justice stating that “Wives should not attempt to

dominate their husbands, nor husbands their wives. . . .” (*Women* no. 73). As further questions arose, the House of Justice addressed the issue of the action to be taken when the consultation of the two parties fails to yield agreement, and wrote: “There can, however, be no majority where only two parties are involved, as in the case of a husband and wife. There are, therefore, 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” (*Women* no. 75). This prompted a further question concerning the conditions under which one spouse should defer to the other. The Universal House of Justice’s response demonstrates the exercise of restraint in referring to “the principle that the rights of each and all in the family unit must be upheld, and the advice that loving consultation should be the keynote, that all matters should be settled in harmony and love, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other. Exactly under what circumstances such deference should take place, is a matter for each couple to determine. . . .” (*Women* no. 76). Among other examples of restraint are the statements of the Universal House of Justice calling for flexibility in defining the roles of husband and wife in relation to the provision of financial support for the family and the care of children, and also in determining the amount of time a mother should spend working outside the home (*Women* no. 78).

### **The Education of Women**

Implementation of the Bahá’í principle of education for women and girls has been a special challenge to Bahá’í communities in countries and cultures where the time-honored tradition has been to deny education to females for a variety of reasons, all of them spurious—that it is a waste of effort because of their inferior intellectual capacity, that they will not use it since they will be occupied only in routine domestic duties which require no education, or that female education will lead to immorality or even promiscuity. Even in the Western world, women have faced great difficulty in getting admission to professional education programs and, beyond that, in being treated seriously within such programs.

The Bahá’í approach to the education of girls and women has been a combination of progressive clarification and progressive application. It is useful to examine it in some detail, as it brings up some very interesting points about social change.

Progressive clarification begins with the stress laid by Bahá’u’lláh on education, in statements such as: “Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom” (*Gleanings* 260). He assigns to the father responsibility for “the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing and in all that hath been laid down in the Holy Tablet” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 48), thus specifically including women within that call.

Elaborating on the seminal teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, a number of elucidations in the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá amplify their meaning and intention. He affirms that “Universal education is a universal law” (*Promulgation* 300) and clarifies its application to the education of girls, in these words: “it is incumbent upon the girls in this glorious era to be fully versed in the various branches of knowledge, in sciences and the arts and all the wonders of this preeminent time, that they may then educate their children and train them from the earliest days in the ways of perfection” (*Women* no. 46). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá proceeds further to assert that “the education of woman is more necessary and important than that of man, for woman is the trainer of the child from its infancy,” since the “imperfection of woman implies a condition of imperfection in all mankind” (*Women* no. 47).

Of far-reaching significance is the further clarification of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the effect that Bahá’u’lláh “promulgated the adoption of the same course of education for man and woman” (*Women* no. 48). He calls for both sexes to follow the same curriculum and relates this to the promotion of the equality of men and women and the promotion of peace, specifying that: “Daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes. When all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed” (*Women* no. 48).

He affirms that many of the differences apparent between women and men, the differing functions assigned to them, and the inequities that persist, are due to the fact that women have been deprived of education and the opportunity to develop those skills that would enable them to participate fully in society. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “In this Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, the women go neck and neck with the men. 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* 59.5), and He envisages that “it will come to pass that when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, when they enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics, war will cease. . . .” (*Promulgation* 135).

In many parts of the world, in both the East and the West, certain professions have been traditionally reserved for males—a condition that exists even in the present day. These include law, service in national

legislatures, engineering, and manufacturing and agricultural pursuits. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifically identified these areas as professions to which women should direct themselves, as evidenced by His statement concerning “laws and politics” and His advice that “Women must especially devote her energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences, seeking to assist mankind in that which is most needful. By this means she will demonstrate capability and ensure recognition of equality in the social and economic equation” (*Promulgation* 283).

The process of progressive clarification shows how the scope of the subject of education was expanded from Bahá’u’lláh’s seminal statements concerning “the art of reading and writing,” to girls being trained “in sciences in the arts,” and then to their following “the same curriculum of study” as males, and later the special emphasis on women’s involvement in traditionally male activities.

It is informative to trace the process of progressive application of the Bahá’í principle of the education of girls and women. From the earliest days of the small Bahá’í community centered around Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Holy Land, the education of children—both girls and boys—was emphasized, within the limits imposed by the confinement of the family and companions as prisoners of the Ottoman Turks and by the meager facilities available to them. The emphasis on education was constant. Lady Blomfield, an early Bahá’í, describes how, when the family of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was evacuated temporarily from Haifa to the village of Abú-Sinán during the period of World War I when Haifa was in danger of bombardment, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá arranged for schools to be set up in that village to ensure that the children’s education was not neglected (190). In addition, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá formulated plans to establish a girls’ school in Haifa. His wife Munírih Khánúm gave it her enthusiastic support. Although circumstances did not permit the plans to reach fruition, other facilities for the education of girls later became available there. A further example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s personal commitment to the education of girls was the provision He made for some of His granddaughters to attend college in Beirut and Cairo and in England in the early years of the twentieth century.

The strategic approach adopted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the process of progressive application is shown by His efforts to establish schools for girls in Iran, where the educational opportunities available to girls were negligible. This country had, at the time, the largest Bahá’í community in the world. Bahá’í schools were established not only in the capital city but also in towns and villages. They were renowned for their emphasis on moral and spiritual training, their attitude of respect and dedication to learning shared by students and teachers alike, as well as their high academic standard, their progressive curriculum, and their use of modern educational methods including laboratory-based science classes and gymnastics.

To facilitate the establishment and acceptance of the Baha’i schools for girls in Iran and to make possible the introduction of a progressive curriculum, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá recruited highly qualified teachers from North America. The recruitment of qualified teachers lent credibility to the enterprise in the eyes of the Persian community. It also intensified the interest in women’s education in the West and provided an avenue for the Western Bahá’ís to collaborate with their co-religionists in the East.

The Bahá’í schools in Iran achieved a high standard of excellence and, until their closure in 1934 as a result of governmental action, were regarded as among the very best schools in the country (Khan and Khan 186).

To examine Shoghi Effendi’s role in furthering the education of women, it is necessary to reflect on the fact that, as head of the Faith, he set about laying and strengthening the foundations for the erection of the Administrative Order as a preliminary to the systematic expansion of the Faith throughout the world. He utilized the Spiritual Assemblies as a vehicle for furthering the advancement of women, including their education. For example, writing in 1926 to the Spiritual Assemblies throughout the East, Shoghi Effendi states that one of their major functions is “to promote the emancipation and advancement of women and support compulsory education of both sexes.” Further, in a 1928 letter to the Iran Central Spiritual Assembly, Shoghi Effendi stresses the importance of Bahá’í literacy classes and encourages the initiation of educational programs to prepare women for service on Local and National Spiritual Assemblies (Khan and Khan 212). As the Administrative Order expanded all over the world, it provided an ideal vehicle for achieving this objective.

The contribution of the Universal House of Justice to the process of progressive application has included its direction to national and continental Bahá’í communities to attend to special needs in relation to the education of girls and women. For example, writing to the Baha’is in Africa in 1996, the House of Justice states:

Parents have a special responsibility to see that their children, both boys and girls, receive an education; and they must take care that the girls are not left behind, since well-educated girls are a guarantee of the excellence of future society: indeed, preference should, if necessary, be given to their education. Closely linked to this concern is the principle of the equality of men and women taught by Bahá’u’lláh. It is also highly desirable for adults, men and women, who are illiterate to participate in literacy programs, so that gradually all Baha’is will be able to read the Word of God for themselves. (*Four Year Plan* 4.9)



There are innumerable examples of Baha'i educational programs designed to educate women. They include literacy programs; tutorial schools; primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions; agricultural and medical projects; educational radio stations; training institutes for income-producing crafts; and programs in rural development and village-level hygiene.

### **The Emergence of Women**

The emergence of women into full participation in all areas of society is a basic objective of the Bahá'í Faith and a logical consequence of its promotion of the equality of women and men. The achievement of this objective is being accomplished through the processes of progressive clarification and progressive application.

The magnitude of the challenge presented to the Faith is evident from recalling that, for much of the time since the Faith began, women in the East were kept secluded in their homes, compelled to wear the veil under penalty of being regarded as immodest if they were to discard it. They lived in a reactionary society that scrutinized Baha'i conduct in the hope of finding evidence with which to arouse fresh opposition to the Faith and to renew or intensify the persecution of the Bahá'ís. In addition, Bahá'í men only gradually acquired an adequate understanding of the magnitude of the change in the status and role of women called for by the Baha'i Faith.

For this reason, the approach to the emergence of women in the East was quite different from that in the West, where there were fewer constraints on the activity of women and greater freedom to participate in society. My attention is directed here principally to the strategies used for the emancipation of Bahá'í women in the East.

There are deeply moving passages in the Tablets Bahá'u'lláh addressed to Bahá'í women, offering them consolation and reassurance as they labored to serve the Faith despite their restrictions. In one passage He addresses a woman in this way: "do not consider thyself to be insignificant by doubting what a handmaiden living behind the veil can do. . . ." and advises her:

With a firm heart, a steadfast step and an eloquent tongue arise to spread the Word of God and say: "O God, although I am sitting concealed behind the screen of chastity and am restricted by the veil and exigencies of modesty, my cherished hope is to raise the banner of service and to become a maidservant at Thy Holy Threshold; to ride on a charger and penetrate the army of the ignorant, defeat the mighty regiments and subvert the foundations of error and violation. . . ." (*Women* no. 101)

The time had not yet come for a more intensive campaign for the liberation of women.

A major step forward was taken by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Aware of the disruption that would be created and the counterreaction that would be provoked if Bahá'í women in the East were suddenly to assert their right to full participation in society, He called upon them to trust His approach, stating: "I am endeavouring, with Bahá'u'lláh's confirmations and assistance, so to improve the world of the handmaidens that all will be astonished. . . . 'Abdu'l-Bahá will tactfully take appropriate steps. Be assured. In the end thou wilt thyself exclaim: 'This was indeed supreme wisdom!'" (*Women* no. 13).

There appear to have been four components to His approach: (1) His continual encouragement to women, together with His repeated promises that the full emancipation of women will definitely be achieved, and His unyielding assertion that women must be permitted to participate fully in human society for humanity to have true freedom and for world peace to be established; (2) His steps to foster the education of women, as discussed in the previous section; (3) His dispatch to Iran of educated and capable Western Bahá'í women, such as Drs. Susan Moody and Sarah Clock, and Misses Elizabeth Stewart and Lillian Kappes, who provided examples of role models to their Iranian Baha'i sisters, in addition to being a source of both expertise and encouragement (Khan and Khan 161, 185). Not only did 'Abdu'l-Bahá provide role models, He actively encouraged Persian Baha'i women to emulate these role models in statements such as this:

In this day the duty of everyone, whether man or woman, is to teach the Cause. In America, the women have outdone the men in this regard and have taken the lead in this field. They strive harder in guiding the peoples of the world, and their endeavours are greater. They are confirmed by divine bestowals and blessings. It is my hope that in the East the handmaids of the Merciful will also exert such effort, reveal their powers, and manifest their capacities.... (*Women* no. 105);

(4) His call for consultative meetings of women, described in His Writings as a "women's assemblage" (*Women* no. 13).

In the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, women in the East generally lacked both the opportunity for education and any kind of a life outside their home. To compensate for this deprivation, 'Abdu'l-Baha called for these women's

assemblages as a means of increasing women's understanding of the Faith and raising their level of general knowledge and personal competence. It is evident that He viewed these gatherings as having the potential to contribute significantly to the development of women and the potential to raise their status within the community. Such gatherings were an important training ground for women to deepen their knowledge of the Faith and to acquire the intellectual skills and competencies needed to participate in the evolving administrative institutions of the Cause. They were also a source of encouragement and a means of consciousness-raising.

Women's assemblages were held throughout Iran and had a major impact on the lives of women, indeed, on the Baha'i community as a whole. For example, in the early 1920s the Tarbiyat girls' school instituted a monthly conference for mothers and other women, who had no other opportunity for education, no organized activities, and no involvement outside the home. The conferences were extremely popular, attracting several hundred women.

Shoghi Effendi continued the development of these processes. He encouraged the formation of national committees for the progress of women in Iran and other countries in the East. Like 'Abdu'l-Bahá before him, Shoghi Effendi called upon the special skills and services of capable, intelligent, and practical women to undertake sensitive and delicate international assignments for the Faith. He often drew upon the talents of Western Bahá'í women, such as Keith Ransom-Kehler, to undertake special missions in Iran (Khan and Khan 217). These assignments demonstrated the Guardian's faith in the capacity of women, and the presence of such women in Iran underlined the importance of the principle of equality and encouraged the female believers.

Initially the Guardian did not discourage removal of the veil in countries such as Iran where antagonism to the Faith was so great. However, it was quite clear that he yearned for the day when the veil could be discarded. In a general letter dated 6 December 1928, Shoghi Effendi referred to "the growing unpopularity of the veil among almost every section of society" (*Bahá'í Administration* 148) in Iran as one of the promising signs of improvement in the conditions of life in that country, while in 1944 he identified "the disuse of the veil" as a welcome sign of the declining influence of the Iranian ecclesiastics (*God Passes By* 229). In countries where neither civil law nor the need for wisdom necessitated retention of the veil, Bahá'í women were encouraged to discard it. Disuse of the veil was, indeed, a prerequisite to women's election to Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. For example, in a letter of 27 December 1923 to the Baha'is of India and Burma, Shoghi Effendi specified that "those women who have already conformed to the prevailing custom in India and Burma by discarding the veil should not only be given the right to vote for the election of their local and national representatives, but should themselves be eligible to the membership of all Bahá'í Assemblies throughout India and Burma, be they local or national" (*Women* no. 114).

Using a progressive approach, the Guardian labored to develop the Bahá'í communities in the Muslim countries of the Middle East so that women could be elected to National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, institutions having jurisdiction over both male and female Baha'is—a victory he celebrated in 1954 when it was achieved in Iran.

The Universal House of Justice has further intensified the measures taken to involve women in all aspects of community life. To institutionalize the practice of equality, it has assigned goals to National Spiritual Assemblies, in countries where traditional restrictions on the freedom of women have been pronounced, to arrange Bahá'í activities for women. It has encouraged the establishment of Bahá'í local and national women's committees as a means of fostering, in a conscious and systematic manner, the advancement of women.

In addition to setting general goals and calling for certain measures to be adopted, the Universal House of Justice underlines continuing deficits in relation to the practice of equality in particular parts of the world. For example, writing to the Bahá'ís of the Indian subcontinent and adjacent areas, the Universal House of Justice states: "we call upon you to give special attention to the advancement of women. In almost all of your region, women have traditionally played a secondary role in the life of society, a condition which is still reflected in many Bahá'í communities. Effective measures have to be adopted to help women take their rightful place in the teaching and administrative fields" (*Four Year Plan* 10.11). Likewise, the Bahá'ís in the African continent are called upon to "Multiply plans and programs to raise the status of women and to encourage the active support of men in such endeavors" (*Four Year Plan* 4.13).

The establishment in 1992 of the Bahá'í International Community Office for the Advancement of Women by the Universal House of Justice has given additional impetus to Bahá'í endeavors at a national level to bring to the attention of the wider society the Bahá'í principle of the equality of the sexes. To date, fifty-two National Spiritual Assemblies have established Offices for the Advancement of Women, functioning at a national level and drawing on the advice from the international office.

### **The Principle of Convergence and Shaping the Social Order**

The operation of the principle of convergence, a principle that emerges from the provisions of the Bahá'í Covenant, is driven by the processes of progressive clarification and progressive application of the teachings. The operation of this principle gives insight into the Bahá'í approach to shaping the social order. The examples discussed above

demonstrate how the seminal teachings of Bahá'u'lláh have been and will continue to be elucidated and applied in a strategic manner, with attention being given to the areas of greatest need and the availability of resources within the Baha'i community.

What has been described in relation to the advancement of women is an unfinished process. It is, nevertheless, a process that gives reason for optimism about the future. The Bahá'í approach to social transformation and the implementation of the equality of the sexes is non-Utopian. It recognizes and gives attention to fundamental attitudinal change, even in those parts of the world where there are entrenched barriers to the participation of women.

The provisions of the Covenant ensure a continued commitment to change and to the implementation of the Baha'i spiritual principles and teachings on the part of individuals and Bahá'í social institutions. The process of implementation is nurtured by educational programs designed to assist individuals and communities to gradually bring attitudes and actions into conformity with the spiritual principles. Bahá'í institutions are actively involved in the implementation process by consciously instituting plans for social change at local and national levels. These institutions will ensure that there is no prolonged departure from the practice of the equality of the sexes.

In the course of shaping the social order, questions will inevitably arise concerning the application of the principle of equality of women and men. While some questions may be resolved by reference to the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the elucidations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, other issues will be resolved by reference to the Universal House of Justice. In addition, the Universal House of Justice will take the initiative to highlight areas of deficit in the practice of equality and to point to areas of greatest need and opportunity for social evolution.

Because of the provisions of the Covenant, we can look forward with confidence to a future in which the practice of the principle of the equality of the sexes will ever more closely approximate the vision of humanity's oneness outlined in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and rearticulated in *Who is Writing the Future? Reflections on the Twentieth Century*. We can, likewise, be assured that Baha'is—individuals, institutions, and communities—will grasp the “unprecedented opportunities,” which characterize this critical time in history, “to participate in the writing of the planet's future” (Bahá'í International Community 14).

## Notes

1. Based on unpublished Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Used with permission of the Universal House of Justice.

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