

The Interdependence of Bahá'í Communities Services of North American Bahá'í Women to Iran

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Abstract

Cooperation between the Bahá'í communities of Iran and North America in spiritual and social fields goes back to the early years of this century. Initially, renowned Bahá'í teachers such as Abu'l-Fadl¹ were sent by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the United States to teach the Bahá'í Faith and to expand the new believers' understanding of its tenets. Later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi appealed to American Bahá'ís and encouraged them to respond to the social needs of their coreligionists in Iran. This article examines the American Bahá'í women's response and the significant contribution they made in developing the Iranian Bahá'í community.

Résumé

La coopération entre les communautés bahá'íes d'Iran et d'Amérique du Nord sur les plans spirituel et social remonte aux débuts de notre siècle. Des enseignants Bahá'ís renommés, tels que Abu'l-Fadl¹ furent alors envoyés aux États-Unis par 'Abdu'l-Bahá pour y enseigner la Foi et aider les nouveaux croyants à approfondir leur compréhension de ses préceptes. Par la suite, 'Abdu'l-Bahá et Shoghi Effendi lancèrent un appel aux bahá'ís américains, les encourageant à répondre aux besoins sociaux de leurs coreligionnaires d'Iran. Cet article examine comment les bahá'íes américaines répondirent à cet appel et la contribution importante qu'elles firent au développement de la communauté bahá'íe d'Iran.

Resumen

La cooperación entre las comunidades bahá'ís de Irán y de Norteamérica en los campos espirituales y sociales data desde los comienzos de este siglo. Al principio, maestros bahá'ís de renombre tales como Abu'l-Fadl¹ fueron enviados por 'Abdu'l-Bahá a los Estados Unidos con el fin de enseñar la Fe Bahá'í y de aumentar el conocimiento de los nuevos creyentes referente a sus principios. Luego, 'Abdu'l-Bahá y Shoghi Effendi llamaron la atención de los bahá'ís norteamericanos y los animaron a acoplarse a las necesidades sociales de sus coreligionarios en Irán. Esta disertación analiza la respuesta de la mujer bahá'í americana y la importante contribución que hicieron éstas al desarrollo de la comunidad bahá'í iraníana.

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 215). At the heart of such a civilization is the spiritual, economic, and social well-being of humanity. Without concern for spiritual health, economic development, and improvement in social conditions, religion has no claim to validity and cannot make progress. The length of time needed for the introduction and sustenance of meaningful change depends on several factors. The power of the creative Word, the generating influence of the spiritual forces released, receptivity of the people, commitment of the followers of the new creed to champion the cause of change, availability of means, and the nature and timeliness of activities undertaken all play a crucial role. This article presents the findings of a study regarding the North American women's espousal of the Bahá'í Faith and their timely response to the social needs of their Iranian coreligionists.

Spread of the Bahá'í Faith in America

The name of Bahá'u'lláh was first mentioned in North America in 1893.² The first Western adherent of his cause, Thornton Chase, embraced the Bahá'í Faith in Chicago in 1894. Two years earlier Bahá'u'lláh had passed away in what was then Palestine, and his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was appointed as Bahá'u'lláh's successor and centre of the Covenant. The swift spread of the Bahá'í Faith to the West is owed not only to the applicability of its message but also to the needs of the time and availability of means of communication and travel. The need for a fresh spiritual stimulus was strongly felt in the nineteenth century. Bahá'u'lláh's enunciation, in the latter half of that century, of teachings and laws to unite humankind in a common cause, provided the focus. His advent renewed

hopes of salvation and released spiritual forces needed to prepare the way for ushering in the oneness of humanity and establishing universal peace.

After Thornton Chase, many receptive souls, among them a number of prominent women, entered the Faith. Some of them sought 'Abdu'l-Bahá's permission and embarked upon a historical voyage to 'Akká, Bahá'u'lláh's place of exile in Palestine. The means of travel, although primitive compared with that now available, nevertheless existed. The advent of the steamer ship had connected the East and the West. The intention of the group in making the trip to the Middle East was twofold: (1) To make a pilgrimage to the land where the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith spent the last twenty-five years of his life and where he is buried; and (2) To meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá and partake of his divine wisdom. Their arrival in Palestine in 1898 signalled the dawn of the process of integration of the East and the West—a process that evolved and entailed many significant developments and undertakings.

Early American Bahá'í Women Who Rendered Outstanding Service to Iran

Louisa A. Moore (Lua Getsinger)

Among the first group of pilgrims was Lua Getsinger. She was in love with the Faith she had espoused and wished to devote her life to its service. 'Abdu'l-Bahá saw in her the potential to undertake and accomplish great tasks. He nurtured her zeal and enthusiasm, and provided her with spiritual guidance and momentum. Her intense love for Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and her selfless way of conveying Bahá'í teachings to others made her a remarkable teacher of the Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá surnamed her *Livá* (banner) and *Ummu'l-Mu'minín* (mother of the believers). Also, he appointed her a Hand of the Cause posthumously. She was the first Bahá'í woman appointed to the rank. Shoghi Effendi called her "the mother teacher of the West," and designated her as one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Disciples.³ Through her, outstanding Bahá'ís in the West such as Phoebe Hearst and May Ellis Bolles, the mother teacher of Europe, embraced the Faith and rendered outstanding service.

Lua Getsinger was chosen by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to undertake an important mission on behalf of her coreligionists, in Iran. This was the first mission of its kind undertaken by a believer from the West. She was sent in 1902 to meet Muzaffari'd-Dín *Sháh*, the Shah of Iran, during his second visit to Paris.⁴ The purpose of the visit was to acquaint the Shah and his prime minister, Mírzá 'Alí Asghar *Khán-i Atábak*, who was accompanying the Shah, with the situation of the oppressed Bahá'í community in Iran, to seek restitution of Bahá'í rights, and to appeal for justice on their behalf. The Iranian Bahá'í community had been persecuted since its inception. The Muslim clerical class used every opportunity to incite the population against the Bahá'ís, and the government often condoned the maltreatment of the Bahá'ís by the fanatics.

'Abdu'l-Bahá saw the time as propitious, the place favorable, and the person of Lua fit for the mission he wanted undertaken. Lua received necessary instructions and set out to accomplish the task. She secured an appointment through the Persian embassy in Paris, wrote a petition in English, had it translated into French by a notable Bahá'í of France, Monsieur Hippolyte Dreyfus, and, accompanied by Dreyfus, met with the Shah in the grand reception hall of the Élysées Palace Hotel, where the king and his entourage were staying in September, 1902. Lua was met with kindness and courtesy; she received favorable responses to her petitions (*Star of the West* 15.8:231). Subsequent events in Iran indicate, however, that very little practical improvement was made in treatment of Bahá'ís. The reasons for the lack of progress were manifold. Islam was, as it is now, the state religion of the country; the clerical class was in the ascendancy; and the government's interests dictated its compliance with the desires of the clergy. The requirements of social justice were, therefore, overshadowed by the self-seeking interests of the authorities and the ecclesiastics. But Lua's mission served one important purpose: The truth of the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran was laid before the king and his prime minister. They could no longer use their ignorance of facts as an excuse for inaction to redress the injustices inflicted upon the Bahá'ís. Hence, the execution of a task, heretofore inconceivable in Iran, became a reality. An official petition on behalf of the Iranian Bahá'í community was made to its temporal ruler by an American, female, ardent Bahá'í.

Lua Getsinger submitted a second petition to the Shah through official channels in 1903 when disturbances in Iran claimed the lives of several Bahá'ís in Yazd, Isfahan, and other places. In that petition she said: "And be assured that this Light will never be extinguished, even should you permit the blood of the Bahá'ís to run in rivers throughout your land, for it is evident that the blood of the Persian Bahá'ís is but the oil which has fed and will feed the flame in the Lamp of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh..." (*Star of the West* 15.8:233). This petition produced some relief, and for several years the persecutions ceased.

Dr. Susan I. Moody, *Amatu'l-A'lá* (Handmaid of the Most High)

The initiation of development projects in Iran goes back to the early years of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry. The Bahá'í community in Tehran established a boys' school in 1900; later a group of doctors established a hospital. A female

doctor was needed to treat the female patients, who could not be examined by male physicians. When a group of Bahá'ís from the United States visited Iran in 1908,

some Iranian doctors asked if it would be possible to induce an American woman doctor to come to Tíhrán, Írán, to live, for the purpose of caring for the women of Írán who at that time were so deprived of skilled medical care. Stopping in 'Akká, Palestine, on their return, the Americans communicated this wish to 'Abdu'l-Bahá who asked them if they knew of such a doctor. The name of Dr. Moody was presented, and she received word without delay from 'Abdu'l-Bahá telling her she had been chosen for this great medical work in Írán. "I knew then," Dr. Moody often remarked, "why I had felt the urge so strongly to study medicine; I was obliged to study medicine in order to come to Írán." When the call came from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, she proceeded immediately on her journey. (*Bahá'í World* 6:483)

Susan I. Moody was born on 20 November 1851 in Amsterdam, New York. She became a Bahá'í in 1903 after making an in-depth study of the tenets of the Faith with Isabella Brittingham, one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Disciples in the West. She first studied music, painting, and sculpture but later switched to medicine. She graduated from a medical college in Chicago.

The same spirit of willing obedience that characterized Lua Getsinger's unqualified response to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's instruction also prompted Susan Moody to respond to his appeal without hesitation. She arranged her affairs and left for Iran in November, 1909. In Tehran she joined the team of Bahá'í doctors who had established a hospital called Sehat. To obtain a glimpse of the vital services Dr. Moody was providing to the community of Iran, the following notice and editorial, published in a newspaper in Tehran, should suffice. The notice reads:

DOCTOR MOODY—*American lady*.—Not only does she know medicine, but also gynecology, obstetrics and women's diseases. Her good qualities and kind attributes, her love for her Persian oriental sisters, are all equal. Every day from morning till noon she is in her office, No. 10 Avenue Aladauleh, receiving her patients for consultation, examination and treatment, excepting Friday and Sunday afternoons, when she goes to the Hospital Sehat (Hospital of Health), where she meets the patients of the higher and wealthier class. (*Star of the West* 1.15:9)

The editorial reads:

We give the utmost thanks and gratitude to such a noble woman, to such a respected person, whose presence here is a great privilege to the country of Persia. On account of the great care of this blessed person, the sick of all nationalities, moslems, et al., become healthy and well. We beg of God to keep this blessed and respected person with us. (*Star of the West* 1.15:9)

Dr. Moody's services in Tehran were not confined to the medical field. She worked closely with Bahá'í women who were eager to improve their lot. She encouraged them in their quest for emancipation and equality, and lent them effective help to achieve their objectives. She recognized the need for educating the women if change of a permanent nature was to be realized. She was very supportive of the Bahá'í women and men who shared a similar aspiration. She did all she could to bring about the establishment of a formal Bahá'í girls' school, similar to that of the Tarbíyat Boys' School, established in 1900.

Those genuinely concerned with the education of Iranian Bahá'í children had tried for some time to raise money to establish a formal girls' school in the capital, but the needs of the boys' school and the lack of sufficient means had delayed realization of a girls' school. Their efforts were augmented by the endeavors of the American Bahá'ís, particularly the women, who met the challenge of providing financial assistance and qualified personnel.

In January, 1910, the Persian-American Educational Society was established in the United States, with its headquarters in Washington, D.C. By then the Tarbíyat Boys' School was experiencing financial difficulty. The establishment of the society, approved by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was an attempt to streamline cooperative enterprises between the two countries. One of the services it provided was financial assistance to ensure the continued functioning of the boys' school. In his first report, the secretary of the society said:

On account of the political conditions and general demoralization of internal affairs, the founders of this school, before that time men of means, found themselves unable to continue its activities because of lack of funds.... As an outcome of the interest manifested, and considering the greater needs of the East, as well as

the opportunity for a Bahai demonstration from the West to the Orient, this Society was formed. (*Star* 1.5:2)

The Persian–American Educational Society evolved and later became the Oriental–Occidental Interdependence Society. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, while encouraging the basic aims of the original society, gave them insights to see things in a different light. Recognition of this new perspective led to a name change for the society. The tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, dated 3 April 1910, addressed to officers of the society, reads in part:

According to the reports ... in these days the Persian-American Educational Society is organized in America and the friends of God and the maid-servants of the Merciful with the utmost zeal and enthusiasm are engaged in the solidarity of this Society. if possible, change the name of this Society to Persian-American Interdependence Society so that in the future it may include all points, such as commerce, industry and education so that spiritual and material results and benefits might be produced. (*Star* 1.5:4)

And in another tablet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said:

The believers of God must give great importance to this Society and arise to perform its fundamental principles and essential duties with heart and soul...

Persia and America are in great need of such a Society, even to matters pertaining to material relations between these two Countries, especially America. (*Star* 1.5:4)

Later in his address to the Orient–Occident Unity Conference held in Washington, D.C., ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said:

May the material civilization of America find complete efficacy and establishment in Persia, and the spiritual civilization of Persia find acceptance and response in America.

... May they become one race endowed with the same susceptibilities. May these bonds of amity and accord be firmly established.

... I have traveled this long distance, crossed the Atlantic Ocean to this western continent in the desire and hope that the strongest bond of unity may be established between America and Persia.... May this American democracy be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the universality of mankind. May it be the first to upraise the standard of the “Most Great Peace,” and through this nation of democracy may these philanthropic intentions and institutions be spread broadcast throughout the world. (*Star* 15.8:235–36)

A new era of cooperation based on spiritual principles had begun. Development projects and cooperative ventures between the Bahá’í communities of North America and Iran translated the principle of unity of the Bahá’í world into practice. The interdependence of the East and the West in both spiritual and material matters grew steadily and yielded remarkable results. In February, 1910, Dr. Moody wrote to the American Bahá’ís and conveyed the joyous news:

... The girls’ school is assured. They will start with accommodations for fifty pupils.... Please tell any who want to help that it will take only \$1.50 per month to educate a girl. There are many here too poor to pay and this is the way to help lift Persia from her otherwise hopeless condition. (*Star* 1:2:11)

As soon as the establishment of a girls’ school became a reality, Dr. Moody helped the Iranian friends to secure the services of a qualified American Bahá’í teacher to take charge of the school and ensure its proper functioning and development. At her suggestion Lillian Kappes took up the challenge. We will later learn of Miss Kappes’s services in Iran. The development of the girls’ school was initially very slow.

The 1913 report of the executive secretary of the Persian–American Educational Society, based on Dr. Moody’s submission, offers an interesting analysis regarding subsidized education. First of all, it shows that the Bahá’ís and institutions in Iran, despite economic difficulties, were providing financial help. Second, it shows that the girls’ school was still occupying a rented place. Third, it indicates that Dr. Moody herself offered generous financial assistance not only towards the education of Bahá’í children in Tehran but also to non-Bahá’í educational institutions. Finally, the report provided a list of the children sponsored by individual Bahá’ís and Assemblies in the United States. Of the 77 names listed, 18 were girls and 59 boys. The sponsors consisted of 18 Assemblies, 3 couples, and 67 individuals; 45 women and 22 men (*Star* 4.13: 221–23).

In July 1915, Dr. Moody informed the society in the United States of the creation of a building fund. The plan was to set aside “any margin which may accrue after deducting from the scholarship fund of \$18.00 per annum, the actual expenses of tuition, books, etc. To this will be added such special amounts as the American friends may contribute from time to time” (*Star* 6.7:54). Her letter stated: “This year nine of the American boy pupils received sixth grade certificates from the university. In all forty-three boys passed. From the Girls’ Tarbiet, twelve girls received the same certificate. We are very proud of them, as they have had so few years of preparation” (quoted in *Star* 6.7:54).

Other American Bahá’í women went to Iran and served in different capacities. These women joined with Dr. Moody and other interested people in the country to ensure that the young girls received Bahá’í education, similar to that provided to the boys. In May, 1914, Dr. Moody reported:

We have established twelve centres for teaching girls the foundation principles of the Bahai Revelation—the teachers met on Saturday last.... In about a month we will hold a large meeting for examining the various centers. The boys have had similar classes for three years and their examination this year was a great success. (*Star* 5.5: 74)

The presence of these American Bahá’ís in a country where women had no voice in the decision-making process served another valuable purpose. They provided the example of how women could become assertive and reclaim their God-given rights. The Iranian Bahá’í women gradually began to ask questions. When their petitions for equal treatment remained unanswered, they wrote to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and complained. It is unfortunate that the texts of such petitioning letters are not available, but from the contents of the responses they received one can gain insight into the women’s appeals:

The establishment of a women’s assemblage for the promotion of knowledge is entirely acceptable, but discussions must be confined to educational matters. It should be done in such a way that differences will, day by day, be entirely wiped out, not that, God forbid, it will end in argumentation between men and women....

Now the world of women should be a spiritual world, not a political one, so that it will be radiant....

I am endeavouring, with Bahá’u’lláh’s confirmations and assistance, so to improve the world of the handmaidens that all will be astonished.... Ye need to be calm and composed, so that the work will proceed with wisdom, otherwise there will be such chaos that ye will leave everything and run away. “This newly born babe is traversing in one night the path that needeth a hundred years to tread.” In brief, ye should now engage in matters of pure spirituality and not contend with men. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá will tactfully take appropriate steps. Be assured. In the end thou wilt thyself exclaim, “This was indeed supreme wisdom!” I appeal to you to obliterate this contention between men and women....

No one can on his own achieve anything. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá must be well pleased and assist. (*Women* 6–7)

Two points in the above tablet attract attention: (1) The emphasis on the word *now*. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “Now the world of women should be a spiritual world, not a political one...” and “ye should now engage in matters of pure spirituality and not contend with men.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá knew that in time women would have to enter the “political world” if they were to attain their equality with men, but the time was not then propitious. (2) The need for “wisdom,” which prompted ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s appeal to the women.

Parallel with his appeals to the women, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent tablets to the community in general promoting the principle of the equality of the sexes, emphasizing the importance of educating the women, and explaining the benefits thereof. Here one can discern ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s wisdom in neither overruling the men abruptly, nor immediately granting the women’s petitions, even though these actions were within the scope of his authority and in line with the principle of equality prescribed by Bahá’u’lláh. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá warned the women against “contending” with men; such contention would have delayed the realization of equality. In one tablet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appealed to the women not to press for equality at a time when the Faith was making progress. He said that pressing for equality at that time would hamper the advancement of the Bahá’í Faith and paralyze its institutions. He was fully aware of the men’s fierce resistance to equality at that early stage of the Bahá’í Faith’s development. He had sent them living examples of what educated women could do for the world of humanity and intended to continue the trend until the realization of the goal was at hand.

During her more than twenty-five years of service in Iran, Dr. Moody made one nearly four-year visit to the United States. In response to the expressed wish of Shoghi Effendi, she returned to Iran in 1928:

I pray that you may soon in the company of a capable and devoted American co-worker, resume your historic labors for our beloved Cause in Tihrán. (*Bahá'í World* 6:486)

In spite of her advanced age—she was then 77 years old—she left for Iran in the company of Adelaide Sharp. They visited Haifa, Palestine, on the way and conferred with Shoghi Effendi. Susan Moody spent the remaining years of her life in Iran. She died in Tehran on 23 October 1934. Her funeral, attended by several hundred Bahá'ís, was a testimony to the inestimable esteem in which her highly prized services were held by the friends; it was a magnificent mark of honor for the person to whom the Bahá'í community felt eternally indebted. Shoghi Effendi's cable to the friends in the United States testifies to the worth of her services:

Passing dearly beloved Susan Moody deprives Bahá'í world (of the) far-famed pioneer who, through her indomitable spirit, ceaseless services, earned unique distinction. (She) forged first link in (the) chain uniting (the) spiritual destinies (of the) cradle of our faith (i.e., Persia) and (the) community (of its) stalwart defenders in (the) great American Republic. (I am) instructing Persia rear monument perpetuating memory (of) her noble mission. (I) am gladly defraying whatever expense incurred as token (of) my admiration for community (i.e., America) to which she originally belonged and on which her sacred life shed imperishable lustre. Advise holding befitting Memorial gathering (in) Temple Foundation Hall. (*Bahá'í World* 6:486)

In a message to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran dated 12 November 1934, Shoghi Effendi said Susan Moody excelled in faith and certitude. He referred to the projects she initiated as examples worthy of emulation by others and gave the glad-tidings that the Bahá'ís in America will follow in her footsteps and will hasten to the sacred land of Iran, will continue her undertakings, will engage in the praise and commendation of her luminous and extensive services (*Tawqí'át-i-Mubárah* 1922–1948 136–37).

Lillian F. Kappes

One of the receptive souls in the West who enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh before the turn of the century was Lillian F. Kappes, who became a Bahá'í in New York in 1898–99. A teacher by profession, she met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Thonon on Lake Geneva in October, 1911. She was then on her way to Iran in response to a request for a competent female Bahá'í to serve as the principal as well as teacher of the first Bahá'í girls' school in Tehran. In early 1911 the Bahá'ís in Tehran had appealed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá for assistance from the West in the form of educators. The request was approved. 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed a tablet asking the Bahá'ís in the United States “to select a woman teacher who may fill the position of principal as well as teacher, and send her without delay. The woman must have a share of the knowledge of sciences and be proficient in woman's work, such as sewing, housekeeping, hygiene and household economics...” (quoted in *Star* 2.1:6).

This passage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tablet reflects the nature of the petition in response to which the tablet was revealed and indicates the perceived needs of the Persian women at the time, society's expectations of them, and the influence of tradition on the Bahá'í community's list of priorities when women's secular education was first addressed. It also shows the high expectations that people had of women teachers. In the same tablet 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked for a male teacher for the Tarbiyat Boys' School. The nature of the request reveals the vast difference between the curriculum of the boys' school and the one for the girls:

They have written from Tehran that there is need of a scientific teacher for the School of Tarbiat. He must be efficient in science as well as the English language; for at present there is no man in the School of Tarbiat who is a scientist or linguist. They are in need of both, science and the English language. (*Star* 2.1:6)

To respond to the educational needs of the Bahá'í girls in Iran, some Bahá'í women in Tehran had initiated private projects on a small scale. With 'Abdu'l-Bahá's constant encouragement and guidance, as well as Dr. Moody's perseverance and assistance, the education of girls was finally institutionalized. The Bahá'í girls' school, although operating under the auspices of an existing all-male education committee, was run competently by Lillian F. Kappes. She became the women's spokesperson with regard to their educational needs and served as liaison between the women and the committee.

It is apparent from the following that, after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approval was sought, the friends in Iran specifically requested Miss Kappes’s services:

Word has come from Dr. Moody that the Tehran Board of Consultation has supplicated Abdul-Baha that Miss Lillian Kappes might be permitted to come to that city to teach in the Girls’ Bahai School.... (Star 1.7:14)

Lillian Kappes arrived in Iran, in October, 1911. Her first report, dated 19 December said:

After the first week of almost incessant calling or meeting of friends at special gatherings, I began my work in the main boys’ school and took charge of the girls’ school.... I give the highest class in the boys’ school. The boys have had several years of English, so my work there is easier, but the girls’ school was only started last spring and of the three classes of girls I teach only the highest has had instruction in English.... The native teachers here are lovely women but have never been educated themselves, except the directress who learned or studied fifteen years ago in the mission school here. So the work is seriously handicapped and my hands are full, indeed. But during the three months, or, rather, ten weeks, I have been here, we are slowly evolving into some show of system. (Star 2.18:12–13)

She went to Iran fully aware of the plight of women in that country, aware of the domination of men over all affairs including that of women’s education, and aware of the derogatory manner in which women were treated even within the nascent Bahá’í community. Although her meeting with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Thonon had to some degree prepared her to cope with unforeseen events and despite her readiness to meet the challenge, the seemingly insurmountable obstacles and the resultant stress she experienced threatened her health. She had to administer the girls’ school almost singlehandedly yet without any autonomy. The school had been initially established as a department of the boys’ school and the education committee was principally concerned with the needs of the boys’ school. Miss Kappes was circumscribed in her efforts and could not make much progress. The prolongation of this difficult situation affected her health. In, a letter sent by Dr. Sarah Clock in 1916 to some of the Bahá’í women in the United States, the reality of the situation was disclosed:

Yesterday Miss K. [Kappes] was simply abused by the meeting of 5 men, came home in perfect nervous collapse & was awake all night from sheer nervousness & worry....

Not long ago a tablet came to a Persian here praising Miss K & her work in the school... she has the moral support of many of the best men, all the women who in an excited meeting all stood by her. ... if Miss Kappes were not a Bahai or not less than a saint she would not have put up with all she has, for five years her hands have been tied, that is they have not allowed her to use her own advanced ideas as to a school.... some of the good men are entirely with her. They offer to open another school for her & several of the nicest of the girls will teach for nothing. (Quoted in *In Iran* 3:190)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s loving advice and encouragement, conveyed through his tablets, revealed in honor of those who were concerned with the situation, and Lillian Kappes’s perseverance finally showed results. A society was formed in Tehran to oversee the education of both the girls and the boys. Although the society’s membership was all male, the men worked with Lillian Kappes and followed her suggestions “even in the working of the boys school where she taught English until last year when they permitted her to devote all her time to the girls...” (Clock quoted in *In Iran* 3:191).

Lillian Kappes’s devotion to her profession and her conscientious services to the cause of women’s education were decisive factors in the success of the girls’ school. The school had started on a very modest scale, initially with only 30–50 pupils, but by the time it was closed by the government,⁵ it had 750 Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í students and was considered the best girls’ school in Iran.

Lillian Kappes’s struggles in Iran lasted for nine years. In 1920 she contracted typhoid, which claimed her life. She died in Tehran and became the first Western believer to die in active Bahá’í service in Iran. Shoghi Effendi later designated her as one of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Disciples. In the report of her visit to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Lillian Kappes said, “He iterated and reiterated: ‘I am sending you to Persia that you may serve in Persia, so that all the friends and all the people will praise you’ “ (quoted in *Star* 2.18:2). The educational fund that she had established for the school continued after her death as the Lillian Kappes Memorial Fund and helped in the expansion of the school.

Sarah Clock and Elizabeth Stewart

Dr. Moody had the good fortune of having two other American Bahá'í women helping her in the discharge of her duties. They were Dr. Sarah Clock and Miss Elizabeth Stewart.

Sarah Clock left the United States for Haifa and Iran in September, 1910. Her first letter, dated 20 March 1911, written in Iran, contains some salient points:

All Americans will certainly love Persia if they feel as I do. I am very happy here....

No one can over-estimate the joy of the Persians in anticipation of the coming of Americans. Everything having any connection with America is attractive to them....

The eagerness for education makes the young people and children very apt and only those who are with them are able to realize it.

... if one wants to be convinced of a very practical side of the Revelation, they should see the improvement in the way of living here. It is more apparent here than anywhere. (*Star* 2.3:6–7)

Dr. Clock, although not a teacher by profession, taught English in Tehran for a while. Her aforementioned letter makes this point clear:

A young man had been kind to us when we first came here and I offered to do something for him in return. His sister wanted to study English and although I had never taught anyone, I felt I must try, and before the end of a week I had a room full and finally was invited to a little school and take my class with me.... Two hours a week is very little to give to such bright, eager people, and I want to do more. The opportunity will soon be mine, for another school is to be opened this week. Some of the pupils know English but want experience in talking and I will give them at least two hours each week. (*Star* 2.3:6)

Quoting a letter from Dr. Moody, the executive secretary of the Persian–American Educational Society reported on 13 July 1915, “Dr. Clock and Miss Kappes are interested in establishing centers to teach married women to read and write, and working in the advanced girl students as teachers” (*Star* 6.7:54–55).

Sarah Clock died in Tehran on 24 January 1922. Very little is known about her background and the nature of her twelve years of service in Iran.

Elizabeth Stewart was introduced to the Bahá'í Faith, in 1899 by her renowned aunt Isabella Brittingham, herself an early convert to the Bahá'í Faith in the United States. Miss Stewart immediately recognized the truth of the Cause and paid allegiance to it. When Dr. Moody settled in Iran, she “personally supplicated [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] that Miss Elizabeth H. Stewart might be permitted to come to Teheran as professional nurse to assist the doctor in her medical work” (I. Brittingham quoted in *Star* 1.7:14).

Elizabeth Stewart travelled to Iran in the company of Lillian Kappes, visited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Thonon, and arrived in Iran in October, 1911. She worked with Dr. Moody as a team and “working under the most difficult circumstances, not only saved hundreds of lives, but helped to bring the Bahá'í Communities of Persia and America more closely together” (Whitehead, *Some Early Bahá'ís* 135). Before leaving the United States, Elizabeth Stewart had been appointed to the Unity Band, a Bahá'í committee established in the United States in 1910 for the purpose of corresponding “every month with one of the twelve Women’s Assemblies of the Orient” (Whitehead, *Some Early Bahá'ís* 135).

In 1925, Elizabeth Stewart, in the company of Dr. Susan Moody, returned to the United States for health reasons. She died in the United States in October, 1926.

Genevieve Coy

Lillian Kappes’s untimely death deprived the Tarbíyat Girls’ School of its valiant patron and created a vacuum. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged the Bahá'ís in the United States to send another person to Iran to serve in a similar capacity. In the interim, Qudsíyyih Ashraf,⁶ the first American-educated Persian Bahá'í woman, took charge of the school. During the North American Bahá'í Convention of 1921, Dr. Genevieve Coy, who held a doctorate in psychology, was chosen to replace Lillian Kappes. Dr. Coy, born in 1886, had accepted the Bahá'í Faith in 1911. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá approved her appointment. By the time she visited Haifa on her way to Iran to take up her post in early 1922, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had died, and Shoghi Effendi had succeeded him. Genevieve Coy served as Director of Tarbíyat Girls’ School in Tehran for nearly two years. She returned to the United States in 1924.⁷

Adelaide Sharp

After the departure of Genevieve Coy, the fortunes of Tarbíyat Schools in Tehran suffered a setback. Shoghi Effendi referred to this in his message of 14 November 1926, “the prolonged absence of competent teachers and organizers that can revive the declining influence of a hitherto renowned Bahá’í educational institution... are today subjects of gravest concern to the elected representatives of our suffering brethren and sisters in Persia” (*Bahá’í Administration* 119). He began his message thus:

The situation as I see it calls for the devoted efforts of one or two capable workers who, untrammled and with independent means, can quietly, tenaciously and tactfully, pursue over a considerable length of time the meritorious work of fostering the cause of Bahá’í education, for both boys and girls, in the swiftly changing capital of a promising country. (*Bahá’í Administration* 119)

In the same message he made the following appeal:

I would strongly urge the friends to consult most earnestly with that devoted, experienced and indefatigable handmaid of Bahá’u’lláh, Dr. Moody, whose past services have ennobled the record of collaboration of East and West for the furtherance of the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh. It would be highly satisfactory and immensely helpful if our beloved sister could find it possible and convenient to accompany such a carefully-chosen person on the way to Tihrán, and, by her unrivaled experience and loving-kindness, assist personally in the fulfillment of this pressing need. (*Bahá’í Administration* 119–20)

Speaking of the ordeals awaiting the chosen person and of the rich spiritual rewards that such service would attract, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

Whoever steps into this field will find, as he settles down to his work, that the environment is extremely disheartening, that restrictions are oppressive, that the amenities of social life are lacking, that the forces of opposition are determined and organized. But let him realize also that, however tedious and exacting his labors, however precarious and thankless his task, the pioneer services it is his unique privilege to render in this time of stress will forever live in the annals of God’s living Faith, and will prove a source of inspiration to the countless workers who, in happier times and with better means at their disposal, will consummate the spiritual regeneration and material rehabilitation of Bahá’u’lláh’s native land. (*Bahá’í Administration* 120)

The person who responded to this earnest appeal was another female Bahá’í from the United States—Adelaide Sharp. Her enthusiasm and spirit of devotion matched those of her predecessors. She arrived in Iran in 1929, accompanied by Susan Moody, who was returning to Iran from the United States. They visited Haifa on their way and spent twelve days, receiving spiritual sustenance and guidance from Shoghi Effendi.

Two years after her arrival in Iran, Adelaide Sharp requested and received permission from Shoghi Effendi for her mother Clara Sharp to join her. Upon arrival in Tehran, Adelaide Sharp took charge of the affairs of the Tarbíyat Girls’ School and worked hard to restore its prestige. She continued her work as director of the school until 1934, when the government closed the school. At that time the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran sought Shoghi Effendi’s guidance regarding the services of Miss Sharp. He informed the Assembly that it was necessary for her to reside in the capital and participate in different Bahá’í activities. He also advised both the National Assembly of Iran and the local Spiritual Assembly of Tehran to be very considerate of her and to provide the necessary encouragement and guidance to enable her to be of service (*Tawqí’át-i-Mubárakih* 3:147).

Adelaide Sharp was appointed to and served on several important committees, including the Unity of the East and the West Committee. She also organized study classes for Bahá’í youth on the Bahá’í writings in English. In 1954 when Shoghi Effendi announced that women in Iran could serve as elected members of Bahá’í administrative bodies, Adelaide Sharp became the first woman elected to the National Spiritual Assembly. Her services on that institution spread over a period of fourteen years. She served as the foreign correspondent secretary of the Assembly for many years.

Miss Sharp died in Tehran in October, 1976 and was buried there. The cable sent by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran after her passing, summarizes the manifold services she rendered to the Bahá’í Community in Iran:

Deeply grieved passing dedicated steadfast promoter Cause dearly loved Adelaide Sharp whose selfless

labour nearly five decades community Cradle Faith in educating its children inspiring enriching spiritual life its youth researching translating writings consolidating its administrative institutions and as first woman member its National Spiritual Assembly will always be lovingly remembered stop Her devoted services won her praise beloved Guardian reinforced ties binding American Bahá'í Community to friends Bahá'u'lláh's native land stop Fervently praying Holy Shrines continuous progress her soul Abhá Kingdom stop Advise hold befitting memorial gatherings honour her name stop NSA US holding memorial gathering Mashriqu'lAdhkár. (*Bahá'í World* 17:420)

Women's Services in Iran Assume a New Dimension

Using the force of example to familiarize the Iranian believers with the indispensable contributions of women believers continued during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi. He was well aware of the deep gap that existed between the component parts of the Iranian Bahá'í community, a gap that tradition had created by affording the men every opportunity to render effective service to the Bahá'í Faith and depriving the women of attaining their potential.

In addition to maintaining in Tehran the presence of one or two female Bahá'ís from abroad, Shoghi Effendi nurtured the enthusiasm of capable and brilliant international Bahá'í travelling teachers, such as Martha Root and Keith Ransom-Kehler. He sent them to Iran and instructed the National Assembly of the country to arrange a befitting welcome, to receive them lovingly and with pride, to lend them whatever assistance they required, to ensure their safety and protection by using wisdom and tact, and to make arrangements for them to visit other parts of Iran (*Tawqí'át* 3:128–29).

Keith Ransom-Kehler—The First American Martyr

Keith Ransom-Kehler embraced the Bahá'í Faith in the United States in 1921. She was a university lecturer and a writer. Before she undertook her historic trip to Iran in 1931, she visited Australia and India, where she rendered memorable services. She then travelled to Haifa, visited the Bahá'í sacred shrines, met Shoghi Effendi, and received guidance and direction regarding the mission he encouraged her to undertake. Thereafter, she proceeded to Iran carrying a letter dated 10 June 1932 addressed by the American National Spiritual Assembly to Ridá Sháh Pahlaví. The letter introduced her as the National Assembly's chosen representative to present in person the renewed appeal of removing the ban on entry of Bahá'í literature to Iran. The letter read in part:

Mrs. Keith Ransom-Kehler, an American citizen, a member of the Bahá'í community of this country, and a distinguished student of the teachings and history of the Bahá'í Faith, can, with your Majesty's gracious permission, amplify and supplement the statements made by this Assembly in the written petition addressed to your Majesty under date of January 12, 1932....

The appointment of a representative to journey to Tihrán for the purpose of presenting in person the petition of this Assembly will make it evident to your Majesty how profoundly the American Bahá'ís are moved by their inability to communicate frilly with their fellow-religionists in Persia by reason of the Postal regulations still prohibiting the entry of Bahá'í books and magazines published in the United States and Canada. (Quoted in *Bahá'í World* 5:391)

Upon arrival, Keith Ransom-Kehler received a loving welcome from the Bahá'ís in Tabriz, Milan, Saysan, Mianej, and Qazvin. "Her entrance in Tihrán was like the visit of a queen, amid the acclamations of thousands of rejoicing Bahá'ís. Never had Tihrán so welcomed any guest from the West" (*Bahá'í World* 5:392). On 20 August 1932 Keith Ransom-Kehler cabled: "Mission successful." The cable was followed by a report to the National Spiritual Assembly of the same date. It confirmed what the cable had conveyed: "On August 15 I saw His Highness Taymur Tash and received front him the direct, unqualified assurance that Bahá'í literature would be admitted freely into Persia and permitted to circulate" (*Bahá'í World* 5:392).

Keith Ransom-Kehler acted on the assurance of the court minister and had her Bahá'í books shipped from Beirut. Soon she discovered the betrayal of the promise and the imposition of further restrictions. Her books were confiscated. The Governor-General of Ádhirbáyján refused to receive her during her visit to that province, and police orders forced the local Bahá'ís to abandon the meetings arranged in her honor. She apprised the court minister of these incidents. She also met with the secretary charged with American affairs at the Foreign Office and sent a report of the meeting to the National Assembly. The secretary had confirmed that Bahá'í literature could not circulate in Iran at that time for three reasons:

First, that it is contrary to the constitution of Persia to recognize any religion founded after Islam and, since the Bahá'í religion cannot legally receive recognition, it follows that our literature must remain

unrecognized. Second, that it is contrary to the constitution of Persia to permit the circulation of any literature [which the government considers] opposed to Islam. Third, that the circulation of Bahá'í literature at this time might cause grave internal disorders that would bring much suffering to the Bahá'ís themselves. (Ransom-Kehler report quoted in *Bahá'í World* 5:392–93)

Keith Ransom-Kehler addressed a communication to the Shah on 25 February 1933, refuting the above reasons for not granting permission:

In my report to America,... I shall be constrained to admit that I must have misunderstood completely the purpose and intent of the interpreter, for exhaustive investigation reveals no reference in the Constitution of Persia to the status of religions founded later than Islam.

Since every Bahá'í before he can so designate himself must accept the validity of the Prophet Muhammad and display toward the Qur'án the same reverence as that shown by the most orthodox Muslim, and since this attitude is inculcated through Bahá'í literature, the point of excluding it because it is opposed to Islam will, I fear, be incomprehensible.... I shall await your Majesty's authority to submit the result of my conversation with the Foreign Office, herein set forth, to the proper Bahá'í centers throughout the world; for I have no desire, a second time, to find myself mistaken as to your Majesty's intention. (Quoted in *Bahá'í World* 5:393)

Her appeals to the Shah received no response. The National Assembly addressed another letter to the ruler of Iran through its representative. A part of this letter, dated March 27, 1933, reads:

Information has been received which leads us to believe that the permission granted in your Majesty's name by your Majesty's Minister of Court some months ago removing the ban on the entrance of Bahá'í literature into Persia has now been withdrawn....

The responsibility seems now resting upon us to inform the press that our previous communication, made in perfect good faith, must now be withdrawn. (*Bahá'í World* 5:393)

One year after her stay in Iran, on 8 June 1933, Keith Ransom-Kehler sent a detailed letter to the Shah, voicing her deep concern at the maltreatment of the Bahá'ís of Iran and seeking justice on their behalf. In the same letter she made the following bold statement:

The Bahá'ís of Persia are not a weak and helpless minority: we stand in numbers next to the State religion; but as the League report further says, "The Bahá'ís are by their religion, tenets and character of an extremely conciliatory disposition."⁵

For that reason they patiently endure whatever hardships are imposed upon them by their governments, and for that same reason they are worthy of the utmost trust and confidence from those in authority....

The numerous communications ... which I have had the honor of addressing to the Crown since my interview at the Foreign Office have had but one purpose: that of ascertaining in definite and dependable form whether or not the amazing and feeble statements given me there were really in accord with your Majesty's intent and desire. (Quoted in *Bahá'í World* 5:394–95)

Keith Ransom-Kehler sent a final letter to the Shah on 3 July 1933, the day she was informed that the photographs of 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been burned by officials in Kirmanshah. She closed the letter with the following plea.

I now with the most intense fervor supplicate and implore your Majesty to put a final stop to these fanatical persecutions that disgrace in the eyes of men the annals of Persia's former rulers, by removing this ban against Bahá'í literature, that bids fair if it continues to involve the world in contempt for this sacred land. (Quoted in *Bahá'í World* 5:396)

On the same day she also sent a challenging letter to every cabinet minister and to the president of parliament, saying:

It would give me great pleasure to place in your hands portions of our Bahá'í literature in order to prove the great contribution that it has made to the advancement of Islám in countries unfriendly to its

reception; but although Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian literature, all opposed to Islám, is permitted to circulate, our Bahá'í literature that upholds and converts to Islám is denied this privilege. Therefore I have nothing available to present to you.

In the Post Offices and Customs of Persia, however, are thousands of volumes that have been confiscated. Even a brief survey of any one of these will prove that Bahá'u'lláh lays down as fundamental, loyalty to one's government, and the sanctity and verity of Islám. (Quoted in *Bahá'í World* 5:3 95)

This challenge could not be ignored. The Minister of Education responded in a letter dated 28-4-1312 [19 July 1933]:

I would inform you that today all individuals and inhabitants of the country, whether Mnhammadans or people of other nations, are resting in the cradle of tranquillity and security under the shadow of the power and grandeur of His Majesty Shahanshah Pahlavi, may our souls be sacrificed for him, and they benefit equally from the privilege of existing laws. But in the meantime new publications which are considered contrary to the official religion of the country or its political aspect can not be agreed to. (Quoted in *Bahá'í World* 5:396)

Keith Ransom-Kehler's strenuous efforts in Iran to accomplish the specific mission with which she had been entrusted, although appearing initially successful, did not achieve the desired result because: (1) Although her mission was purely religious in nature, she was dealing with politicians whose honesty of purpose and integrity of character were questionable; (2) The system of government and the prevailing bureaucracy made it impossible for Keith Ransom-Kehler to have direct access to the Shah. Her meeting with the Minister of the Court brought about the confusion that cost his eventual dismissal. It is doubtful that her subsequent petitions addressed to the monarch ever reached him. For this reason, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada sent a delegation of three to present to the Persian ambassador in Washington its letter of 10 July 1933, addressed to the Shah. The letter summarized the outcome of efforts made by Keith Ransom-Kehler and expressed optimism for a favorable result. It remained unanswered; and (3) Keith Ransom-Kehler's sudden and untimely death on 27 October 1933. While on a visit to Isfahan, she contracted smallpox, which claimed her life. Thus ended the mission for which she had been singled out. Shoghi Effendi's message of 30 October 1933 described Mrs. Ransom-Kehler's station and the worth of her services:

Keith's precious life offered up in sacrifice to beloved Cause in Bahá'u'lláh's native land. On Persian soil, for Persia's sake, she encountered, challenged and fought the forces of darkness with high distinction, indomitable will, unswerving, exemplary loyalty. The mass of her helpless Persian brethren mourns the sudden loss of their valiant emancipator. American believers grateful and proud of the memory of their first and distinguished martyr. Sorrow stricken, I lament my earthly separation from an invaluable collaborator, an unfailing counsellor, an esteemed and faithful friend. I urge the Local Assemblies befittingly to organize memorial gatherings in memory of one whose international services entitled her to an eminent rank among the Hands of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. (Quoted in *Bahá'í World* 5:398)

Shoghi Effendi's designation of Keith Ransom-Kehler simultaneously as the first American Bahá'í martyr and a Hand of the Cause of God was a unique honor bestowed upon a Bahá'í. Furthermore, she was referred to as his "invaluable collaborator," "unfailing counsellor," "esteemed and faithful friend," and the "valiant emancipator" of "her helpless Persian brethren." Such attributes used to eulogize a female believer was a cause for reflection by the Iranian Bahá'ís. They saw tangible examples that in the Bahá'í Faith the women were not only capable of scaling the same heights as men but also able to surpass men in their achievements. They also saw that the contribution of such women was recognized and rewarded by the head of the Faith. Thus, psychological barriers to the emancipation of Bahá'í women in Iran were removed one by one and preparations made for women's full participation in all Bahá'í services.

Shoghi Effendi took further steps to show the high station of Keith Ransom-Kehler. In his message of 1 November 1933, he instructed the Tehran Assembly, together with representatives from Shiraz, Kirman, Abadih, Yazd, and the southern ports of Iran, to visit her grave on his behalf. In that message he referred to Keith Ransom-Kehler as the standard bearer of the rights of the persecuted community, the true and peerless helper of the believers in Iran, the object of envy of her Bahá'í brothers and sisters in the Western countries, the one who strengthened spiritual links between the friends in the East and the West, and the one who, both in life and death, was the cause of glory, elevation, and victory of the Cause of God and the exaltation of his Word (*Tawqí'át* 3:128). On 3 November,

he informed the National Assembly of the United States, “Instructed Isfáhán Assembly to inter Keith in the vicinity of the grave of Sultanushushuada,⁹ surnamed by Bahá’u’lláh ‘King of Martyrs’” (*Bahá’í World* 5:398). Shoghi Effendi also advised the Assembly to disseminate his cabled messages among the Bahá’ís of the provinces, that all may learn of and know about the lofty station of Keith Ransom-Kehler.

Martha Root

Another outstanding example of someone who consecrated her life to the service of the Bahá’í Cause was Martha Root. With remarkable success she used her professional training to promote the Faith she had embraced. As a journalist she travelled extensively and took the message of the oneness of humankind to people of all ranks.

Martha Root was born on 10 August 1872 at Richwood, Ohio. She finished her university education in Chicago, heard of the message of Bahá’u’lláh in 1909, and began her life of service a decade later in 1919 when she embarked on her extensive travels for the Bahá’í Faith. When Tablets of the Divine Plan¹⁰ were unveiled in the United States, she was the first to arise in response to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s summons. Her world journeys took her to South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia.

In December 1929 when Martha Root was on her way to Iran, Shoghi Effendi addressed a letter to the Trustees of the Central Assembly (precursor of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran) and the members of local Spiritual Assemblies throughout Iran, introducing her thus:

Miss Martha Root, pride of all believers and foremost among the teachers of God’s Faith, whether men or women, is proceeding to Iran. It is incumbent upon all the friends of God and the handmaids of the Merciful in that blessed land to welcome this precious personage with heart and soul. In glorification of God’s Cause, but with due wisdom and dignity, they should offer hospitality with utmost respect and loving kindness; convene gatherings and hold festivities and prove in words and deeds their pride in being related to a person who has been singled out by God and has noised abroad the fame of the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh. For this peerless believer has, with astonishing power, unsurpassed courage and amazing steadfastness, raised the call of *Ya Baha’u’l-Abhá* among people in the highest ranks; she has brought the sacred name of the Faith of God to the attention of the potentates of the earth, its ministers, intellectuals and sovereigns. She has glorified the oppressed and struggling Bahá’í community of that land in the eyes of the prominent people of the world and endeared it to them. (*Tawqí’át* 2:150–51; authorized translation, Bahá’í World Centre)

Despite the inadequacy of the means of travel, Martha Root visited many provinces in Iran. Wherever she went, she was met with a tumultuous welcome by Bahá’ís, large numbers of whom would await, with reverence and pride, her arrival several kilometers outside the city limits. In Qazvin her adventurous spirit guided her to Táhirih’s family, from whom she gathered information for her book *Táhirih the Pure*.

Martha Root was a prodigy of her time. She had served the Bahá’í Faith in ways that no other had dared. She had introduced a crowned head, Queen Marie of Rumania, and her daughter, Princess Iliana, to the Bahá’í Faith. She had met with King Faisal of Iraq and with many other renowned personalities of the world. Shoghi Effendi has summarized her services in the following tribute contained in his message of 12 February 1929:

... I wish, in a few words, to pay a tribute, however inadequate, to the magnificent services rendered by that exemplary and indefatigable teacher of the Cause, our dearly—beloved sister, Miss Martha Root. Her international travels on behalf of the Bahá’í Faith, so wide in their range, so extensive in their duration, so inspiring in their results, will adorn and enrich the annals of God’s immortal Faith. Her earliest journeys to the southernmost limits of the American continent to India and to South Africa, to the eastern confines of Asia, to the islands of the Southern Seas and the Scandinavian countries of the North; her more recent contact with the rulers and crowned heads of Europe and the impression which her undaunted spirit created in royal circles in the Balkan countries; her close affiliation with international organizations, peace societies, humanitarian movements and Esperantist circles: and her latest victories in the university circles of Germany—all constitute a compelling evidence of what the power of Bahá’u’lláh can achieve. These historic labors, pursued single-handed and in circumstances of financial stringency and ill-health, have been characterized throughout by a spirit of fidelity, of self-effacement, of thoroughness and vigor that none has excelled. (*Bahá’í Administration* 174)

He ended his message with the following extraordinary appeal:

I appeal to individual believers and Bahá'í Assemblies alike to ... respond speedily and entirely to every request that from time to time she feels moved to address to her fellow-workers in every land, to strive to attain the high standard of stewardship that she has set, and to pray from the very depths of their hearts for time uninterrupted continuance of her noble endeavors. (*Bahá'í Administration* 174–75)

When Martha Root died, Shoghi Effendi sent a cable to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States on 3 October 1939 and referred to her as “foremost Hand which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will has raised up (in) first Bahá'í century,” “(the) first, finest fruit (which) the Formative Age (of the) Faith (of) Bahá'u'lláh has yet produced,” and “one whose acts shed imperishable lustre (on) American Bahá'í community.” In the same message he advised the Assembly about sharing the expenses of “erection (of) monument (in) symbolic spot, (the) meeting-place (of) East (and) West, to both (of) which she unsparingly dedicated (the) full force (of her) mighty energies” (*Bahá'í World* 8:646).

In his review of the history of the first Bahá'í century, Shoghi Effendi singled out

for special reference her who ... through her prodigious and indeed unique exertions in the international teaching field, has covered herself with a glory that has not only eclipsed the achievements of the teachers of the Faith among her contemporaries the globe around, but has outshone the feats accomplished by any of its propagators in the course of an entire century. To Martha Root, that archetype of Bahá'í itinerant teachers and the foremost Hand raised by Bahá'u'lláh since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, must be awarded ... the title of Leading Ambassadors of His Faith and Pride of Bahá'í teachers, whether men or women, in both the East and the West. (*God Passes By* 386)

Brilliant and celebrated Bahá'ís like Martha Root and Keith Ransom-Kehler, who had achieved outstanding successes in the teaching field, were sent by Shoghi Effendi to Iran, where they could neither speak the language nor teach the inhabitants. One may ask why. Could it not be for the need to remind the Bahá'ís in that land of the immense potential latent in the world of women?

In 1954 when Shoghi Effendi gave the “glad-tidings” to the Bahá'í women of Iran that during Ridván of that year they would share with the men the right of membership on the local as well national Spiritual Assemblies, he counselled them not to be satisfied with administrative equality. He encouraged them to surpass men in the fields of teaching and pioneering, to outdo them in the arena of service, to become more courageous, more audacious, and more detached. He persuaded the women to emulate the example of their spiritual sisters in America who, he said, had surpassed the men in opening up countries to the Faith. Martha Root was mentioned by name (*Tawqí'át* 3:190—91).

The Impact of the Services of American Bahá'í Women on the Iranian Bahá'í Community

The Bahá'í community of Iran had, from the inception of the Bahá'í Faith, witnessed the sacrifice of unnumbered martyrs and had helped spread the new Faith to the Western hemisphere, yet the community had a basic problem at home. Unwarranted conservatism prevented Iranian Bahá'í women from recognizing their potential and attaining their rights. Role models were needed to correct the community's misperception of women.

The calibre of the women who went to Iran and became catalysts for change was of great significance. They were well educated, independent, audacious, inflexibly devoted to the Bahá'í Faith, highly motivated, and firmly committed to the work they had set out to do. These were precisely the qualities that the Iranians had believed belonged exclusively to men. The Western Bahá'í women who went to Iran proved the notion to be wrong. Several decades of constant and courageous service by the American Bahá'í women provided the Iranian Bahá'í community with the necessary proof that women were capable of shouldering administrative and decision-making responsibilities and that the time had arrived for the Iranian women to try their hand in such works.

It is noteworthy that when the time for the election of women to the national and local Bahá'í institutions arrived, the only woman elected to the National Spiritual Assembly was Adelaide Sharp, an American resident in Tehran. It took the Bahá'í community longer to realize that Iranian women were as capable as any for the job. Bahíyyih Nádirí was the first Persian woman to be elected to the National Spiritual Assembly.¹² Thereafter, until the time of the Assembly's disbandment by the Islamic Revolutionary Government in 1984, the number of women on the National Spiritual Assembly fluctuated between zero and two.

Tracing the process that culminated in the election of a woman or two to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran sheds light on the wisdom that necessitated the gradual implementation of the women's rights to equality with men. The Báb had appointed a woman as one of his Letters of the Living.¹³ Táhirih removed the veil,

championed the cause of change, and refused to honor traditions that kept the women backward. The Báb supported her views and actions, which gave hope and courage to other Bábí women. In Nayríz and Zanján Bábí women fought side by side with the men to defend themselves against the assault of their enemy.

Bahá'u'lláh did not follow the Báb's revolutionary way of introducing sudden change in the fabric of society. He began the gradual process of preparing his followers for spiritual transformation. His mission was to save the moribund body of humanity; he diagnosed the illness and prescribed the remedy. The world, in general, and the Muslim world, in particular, were not ready for the application of the principle of equality during his ministry. Men and women alike would have suffered the adverse consequences of a drastic change. Bahá'u'lláh provided them with time, enunciated the principle of equality, emphasized the tenets of unity and equity, acknowledged the women's contribution to the development of his cause, and praised their achievements. But scope for the implementation of practical change in the status of women remained, of necessity, limited to inconspicuous improvements during his ministry.

'Abdu'l-Bahá continued the trend toward gradual implementation of change. He spoke most forcefully about the need for women's emancipation and progress. He took practical steps to convince members of the community, especially in the East, of women's potential to undertake responsible tasks. However, in his lifetime, 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not pronounce the women in Iran eligible for membership on elective Bahá'í institutions and did not appoint them as Hands of the Cause of God. Also, no Iranian woman was designated as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Disciple. But in the West the story was very different. Out of a total nineteen Bahá'ís whom the Guardian designated as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Disciples, six were women. Some were also designated as Hands of the Cause posthumously. This welcome change was so gradual that its repercussions were not felt in the East, where the men would not hear of the prospect of women serving with them on institutions of the Faith.

When, in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in July, 1936, it was stated that, according to a tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "the membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men, and that the wisdom of it will be fully revealed and appreciated in the future. In the local, as well as the national Houses of Justice, however, women have the full right of membership" (*Women* 14), the membership right could not be extended to the women in Iran. That right was granted only many years later in 1954, at the end of the first year of the Ten Year Global Plan. And this despite the fact that women in India and Burma (non-Islamic Eastern countries) had been made eligible for election since 1923. Shoghi Effendi likewise did not name any Persian Bahá'í woman as a Hand of the Cause, although several of his appointees to the rank in the West were women.

When the Boards of Counsellors were appointed by the Universal House of Justice in 1968, no Bahá'í woman in Iran was appointed a Counsellor. However, in the western Asia zone, Shirin Boman, a woman of Persian background living in India, was appointed to the position in 1970. Later, more women of Iranian origin were appointed Counsellors in India. More recently, Persian Bahá'í women have been designated Counsellors in Africa, Australasia, and Europe.

The paucity of female leaders points to the tremendous difficulty associated with change in the status of Iranian women; yet, the change had to be made. The realization of the change required sacrifice. The American Bahá'í women sacrificed through their selfless service. Their tears of anguish, their self-abnegation, loving labors, long years of suffering in acquiescence, steadfastness, perseverance, and hard work won them success. Bahá'í women in Iran who had received enlightenment through their belief in Bahá'u'lláh, but who had generally remained backward for their lack of secular education, learned, through long years of association with the American Bahá'í women, the value of education, which gave them insights into surmounting the barriers erected on their way to equality. They gradually began to scale the heights of glory destined for all members of the human race. The sacrifices of the early American Bahá'í women were great indeed, but great too was the splendid outcome—the emergence from obscurity of half of the largest Bahá'í community at the time. That half of the community has since been fulfilling a giant share in the execution of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's divine plan; has produced at home and abroad exemplary pioneers, teachers, administrators, and even martyrs—some of whom were still in their teens.

The argument that the implementation of the principle of equality should take longer than it already has involves a danger. The problem with too slow a process of change is that slowness itself becomes a practice and creates a pretext under which the natural and timely consummation of the desired change is indefinitely delayed, if not checked altogether. This stifling process was detected by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He wisely reversed its course with the dispatch of audacious Bahá'í women to Iran. They became catalysts for meaningful change. The imperishable services of the American Bahá'í women in Iran will be undoubtedly remembered for the essential changes they introduced in the way of thinking and in the behavior of the members of the Bahá'í community in that country, especially in the area of implementing the principle of the equality of men and women. Their sacrifices will have borne fruit when the women in Iran and Iranian women abroad attain the fullest degree of equality with men.

Conclusion

The heroic and sacrificial services of the American Bahá'í women, spread over several decades, from 1909 to 1976, achieved two basic purposes: First, as skilled and professional Bahá'ís, they bore eloquent testimony that, given equal opportunity, women were fully capable of ascending to the heights claimed by men in the field of service to humanity. This was an important lesson for the Bahá'í women, whose confidence in their ability to succeed, in what they thought was men's domain, had been shattered over long centuries of deprivation and denial of their rights in a Muslim country ruled by religious bigotry. The lesson was equally valuable to the male Bahá'ís who had held on to their traditional belief of their "divine right" to assume superiority over women.

Second, it provided the means by which the women in Iran could claim their rights. They were offered education similar to that which the men enjoyed. Not only were they provided the requirements of a secular curriculum, they also received enlightenment with regard to what equality meant and how it could be implemented. The services of the American women Bahá'ís in Iran were maintained until the women's equal right to education and to service on local and national Bahá'í institutions were attained.

Notes

1. Abu'l-Fadl was the most outstanding Bahá'í scholar and promoter of the Bahá'í Faith. At 'Abdu'l-Bahá's behest, he went to the United States in early 1901 and stayed there for almost four years. He was designated as one of Bahá'u'lláh's Apostles and a Hand of the Cause of God.

1. Abu'l-Fadl fut l'érudit bahá'í et le promoteur de La Foi bahá'íe le plus réputé de son temps. À la demande d' 'Abdu'l-Bahá, il se rendit aux Etats-Unis au début de 1901 et y demeura pendant près de quatre années. Il fut nommé l'un des Apôtres de Bahá'u'lláh ainsi qu'une Main de la Cause de Dieu.

1. Abu'l-Fadl fue el más destacado erudito bahá'í y promovedor de la Fe Bahá'í. A solicitud de 'Abdu'l-Bahá, fue a los Estados Unidos a principios de 1901, y permaneció allí casi cuatro años. Fue nombrado uno de los Apóstoles de Bahá'u'lláh y Mano de la Causa de Dios.

2. In a session of the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago on 23 September 1893, Henry H. Jessup, a missionary based in Syria, quoted in his speech words that Bahá'u'lláh had spoken to Edward G. Browne in 1891 (see *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses* 640–41). E. G. Browne was the only orientalist granted an interview with Bahá'u'lláh. The interview took place in Bahá'u'lláh's place of exile in 'Akká.

3. A title of distinction given to specific believers who rendered outstanding services to the Bahá'í Faith during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

4. A meeting with a sovereign who enjoyed absolute power over the inhabitants of the country he ruled, by a member of the female sex, regarded inferior and unworthy in Muslims' eyes, especially since she had espoused a religion unrecognized and persecuted in Iran, was an unprecedented event. The envoy sent previously by Bahá'u'lláh to present his epistle to Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, the grandfather and predecessor of Muzaffari'd- Dín Sháh, had been brutally tortured and put to death. He was a seventeen-year-old youth, entitled Badí' (wonderful).

5. Bahá'í schools in Iran were closed on all Bahá'í holy days. The government refused to recognize the Bahá'í Faith and would not tolerate the observance of Bahá'í holy days. The authorities used this issue as an excuse to order the closure of all Bahá'í schools in 1934.

6. Qudsíyyih Ashraf was one of the few Bahá'í women who attended the American missionary school in Tehran. Through Dr. Moody's instrumentality and with the help of some American women believers, she continued her education in the United States. After nine years, she returned to Iran with a master's degree in education. The Ministry of Education refused her employment on the ground that she was a Bahá'í. She later went to Beirut and studied public health.

7. Genevieve Coy continued her services in the United States until 1958 when she pioneered to Salisbury, Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe). She died there on 31 July 1963.

8. Minutes of the Twenty-Second Session of the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations, pp. 41–42.

9. Siyyid Hasan, entitled Sultánu‘sh-Shuhadá (King of Martyrs), was condemned to death for his belief and publicly executed in Isfahan in 1883. He was designated as an Apostle of Bahá’u’lláh.

10. These tablets, fourteen in all, were revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1916. The tablets, addressed to the Bahá’ís in North America, were received by them in 1919. Shoghi Effendi has called the tablets “the supreme charter for teaching.”

11. In Honolulu, Hawaii, which links the two continents of Asia and America.

12. In 1955, widespread persecutions spearheaded by Muhammad Falsafí circumscribed the administrative activities of the Bahá’í Faith in Iran. During that time the publication of *Akhbár-i-Amrī* (*Bahá’í News*) was suspended. The first issue (four in one), which reported the names of members of the new National Assembly, came out in June, 1960. Mrs. Nádirí was also on the National Assembly in 1980 when the Islamic Revolutionary Guards abducted all nine members who have not been heard from since.

13. The first eighteen believers in the Báb. They independently searched for and found the Báb and were designated as *Hurúf-i-Hayy* (Letters of the Living). The numerical value of ‘Hayy’ is eighteen.

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