

Rights and Responsibilities in the Bahá'í Family System

Hoda Mahmoudi and Richard DaBell

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Abstract

This article discusses the rights and responsibilities ascribed in the Bahá'í teachings to the members of the family. The complementary, rather than identical, functions of women and men are explored. It is asserted that through the application of Bahá'í teachings the institution of marriage and family emerges as a fundamental building block in the development of a new society and global civilization based on equality and unity among its members. The need for the application of the principle of gender equality in the family by focusing on the flexible aspects of gender roles as described in the Bahá'í writings is discussed. The importance of consultation as an instrument for effective communication within the family system is explained and its positive outcome in developing a loving egalitarian environment between and among family members is examined.

Résumé

Dans cet article, il est question des droits et des responsabilités attribués, dans les écrits bahá'ís, aux divers membres de la famille. On y explore les rôles complémentaires plutôt qu'identiques, des femmes et des hommes. On y affirme que, par la mise en pratique des enseignements bahá'ís relatifs au mariage et à la famille, ces deux institutions apparaissent alors comme des pierres d'assise sur lesquelles peuvent s'ériger une société nouvelle et une civilisation globale fondée sur l'égalité et l'unité parmi les membres qui la composent. L'article examine ensuite la nécessité d'appliquer le principe de l'égalité des sexes au sein de la famille, en faisant valoir la flexibilité de rôles assignés à chacun d'eux dans les écrits bahá'ís. L'article explique également l'importance de la consultation comme outil de communication efficace au sein de la famille et examine les impacts positifs de la consultation, celle-ci favorisant la création d'un milieu aimant et égalitaire pour tous les membres de la famille.

Resumen*

Este ensayo trata de los derechos y responsabilidades adscritos en las enseñanzas Bahá'ís a los miembros de la familia. Se explora las funciones parejas, y no idénticas, de las mujeres y los hombres. Se sostiene que por medio de la aplicación de las enseñanzas Bahá'ís la institución del matrimonio y la familia surge como un base fundamental en apoyo del desarrollo de una sociedad nueva y una civilización global, basadas en la igualdad y unidad de sus miembros. Se trata de la necesidad de aplicar el principio de igualdad de género en la familia por medio del enfoque en los aspectos flexibles del papel de género como descritos en las enseñanzas Bahá'ís. Se explica la importancia de la consulta como un instrumento para la comunicación eficaz dentro del sistema familiar y se examina su resultado positivo en desarrollar un medioambiente igualado entre y dentro de miembros de la familia.

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The institution of marriage and family is the fundamental building block of society. It is within the family system that one first learns what it is to be a human being; the concept of collective identity, intimacy, sex-role identity, cooperative behavior, internalization of values and morals, and the ability to act responsibly and maturely are all formulated within the socialization process originating in the family.

According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, "... the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 168). Bahá'u'lláh states that the purpose of marriage is the promotion of unity. So important to society is the sacredness and the function of marriage that Bahá'u'lláh writes, "And when He [God] desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed observances and created laws: among them He established the law of marriage, made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation..." (*Bahá'í Prayers* 105).

To promote unity within the family and strengthen the marital bond, individual spiritual development and transformation are necessary. To safeguard the vitality and stability of the institution of marriage, each individual Bahá'í seeks spiritual growth through daily prayer and study of and reflection on the Word of God and strives to manifest the laws and principles of Bahá'u'lláh through individual deeds and actions. This daily spiritual exercise enables the human spirit to grow, develop, and exhibit attributes such as trustworthiness, justice, unity, compassion, kindness, and sacrifice, which become the means for the development of sound, mature interpersonal skills. These skills provide the means for the preservation of marriage, the advancement of a sound spiritual foundation for the family, leading ultimately to the progress of humanity.

The Bahá'í writings caution that should the bond of matrimony be weakened, society will be negatively affected at all levels. For unless the institution of marriage evolves as a safe, secure, and stable entity, the very foundation and structure of society will decline and disintegrate. Bahá'í couples are encouraged to endeavor to make every effort possible to preserve the marital bond. The Bahá'í writings offer an important perspective on this matter: "Couples are encouraged to make every effort to 'salvage their marriage for the sake of God, rather than for their own sake', confident in the knowledge that even if their 'endeavours do not yield any immediate fruit' they are, thereby, fulfilling their 'duty as a Bahá'í' "*(Preserving Bahá'í Marriages 5)*. For this reason, divorce in the Bahá'í Faith is strongly condemned and is "*to be avoided at all costs if possible...*" (*Divorce 11*).

A profile of the family in the 1990s depicts an institution that is breaking down, is being affected by changing gender roles, and is undergoing moral decay. The changing social conditions of the modern world have influenced family life and altered some of its traditional norms. For example, the idealized nuclear family of parents and children, with the mother at home attending to the care of the children, is no longer a reality. Although the nuclear family—natural mother and father present in the home—is still the standard, in actuality today's family system has changed and presents variations from the typical nuclear prototype. An examination of the changes the family has experienced over the past thirty years indicates an increase in the rate of divorce and in the number of working mothers and single-parent families (with a concomitant rise in the rate of poverty and homelessness among women and children).

To gain a deeper understanding of the important role of the family, it is the aim of this article to examine the Bahá'í perspective on marriage and family life, with particular emphasis on gender roles and the principle of the equality of women and men. The rights and responsibilities as ascribed in the Bahá'í teachings to the members of the family will be analyzed and their relation to the establishment of unity and equality within the Bahá'í family system will be discussed.

The Bahá'í Perspective

From the Bahá'í perspective, the current status of the institution of marriage and family is but one sign of the overall disintegration of societal norms and patterns. A survey of the condition of humanity today reveals signs of decline and confusion in virtually every aspect of society. The collapse of economic systems, the instability and fall of governments, the crisis prevalent in the institution of education, the breakdown of the family, the increase in crime and corruption, and the destruction of the environment are some of the disturbing signs of the disintegrating process ongoing throughout the world. At the same time as society is experiencing a collapse, according to the Bahá'í teachings, there is an emerging integrative or unifying process moving humanity toward a new age in which the world is becoming smaller and the interdependence of its people and nations a reality. This age, according to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, requires a new social system based on unity with justice and equality for all people.

Without these crucial elements of justice, unity, and equality, human civilization is incapable of advancing. The aim of the Bahá'í Faith is to change outmoded institutions, including aspects of the family system, and to integrate new forms into the social life of humanity. Antiquated institutions cannot solve present-day problems and must be altered. Shoghi Effendi explains this condition in the following statement:

If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? (*The World Order 42*)

The role of the institution of the family and the spiritual changes that it must undergo are of paramount importance to its emergence as an institution aimed at promoting the welfare of the generality of humankind. It is the institution charged with the fundamental role of developing justice, unity, and equality at the basic level of society. To the

extent that the family succeeds in accomplishing this goal, the achievement of individual and societal transformation, as ordained in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, will become realized.

The major changes the institution of marriage and family is undergoing today must be set in the context of the needs of a new age that requires new models and solutions for an "evolving humanity." An important issue that must be addressed is the changing role in the relationship between women and men. Throughout human history women have been oppressed and dominated by men, restricted from receiving an education, viewed as being incapable of and prevented from participating equally with men in all the arenas of society, and treated as second-class citizens.

In the Bahá'í teachings, gender roles and the relationship between the sexes are viewed in light of the basic principle of full equality between the sexes. Bahá'u'lláh writes, "In this Day the Hand of divine grace hath removed all distinction. The servants of God and His handmaidens ['servants' referring to men and 'handmaidens' to women] are regarded on the same plane" (quoted in *Women* 3). Bahá'u'lláh states that "women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God" (quoted in *Women* 26). What is lacking in terms of the achievement of full equality between the sexes is not the spiritual fact that both women and men have been created equal, but that humanity continues to cling to prejudiced attitudes, oppressive behaviors, and unjust actions that promote the subjugation of women.

The importance of gender equality in the family and its impact on society are discussed by sociologist Randall Collins, who writes:

The family has always been an important part of society, and it continues to be so today. It has long been argued that the basic unit of stratification is not the individual so much as the family. Thus, inequalities between rich and poor... [a]nd of course, feminist issues concerning male–female inequality hinge upon the way in which sexual discrimination outside the larger world of work interacts with male domination inside the family. (*Sociology of Marriage* 20–21)

The Universal House of Justice, more broadly and in very strong language, has stressed the essential need for gender equality:

The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations. There are no grounds, moral, practical, or biological, upon which such denial can be justified. Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge. ("To the Peoples" 13)

A quick examination of male–female attitudinal differences regarding marriage and family elucidates this trend of the perpetuation of inequalities within the family and the society at large. On the one hand, studies have shown that married people are by and large happier than those unmarried. On the other hand, the findings also indicate that, on the average, unmarried or divorced women are happier than unmarried or divorced men (see Bradburn, *Structure* 149).

In terms of equality in housework, women spend at least four times as much time on such tasks as do men. Even if a wife is employed full-time, the time the husband spends on housework does not increase. In a study by Walker and Woods (*Time Use*), it was reported that "men's family work occupied about 1.6 hours per day, compared to 8.1 hours per day for housewives and 4.8 hours per day for employed wives" (also see Berk; Davidson & Gordon).

Collins reports that "men tend to have greater power in families, especially based on their usually superior resources in occupational prestige, income, education, and participation in outside organizations" (*Sociology of Marriage* 314). On the one hand, this condition has an emotional cost for full-time housewives who make themselves subservient to their husbands to keep the marriage together. On the other hand, working women report being happier in their marriages (Bernard, *Future*), and dual-career marriages are reported as providing more equality and respect between the spouses (Rapoport and Rapoport, *Dual Career Families*).

Finally, studies have shown that traditional marriages, with their unequal distribution of power and overall inequality, have an adverse effect on women's mental health (Gove, "Relation"). Holden ("Depression") found that among married women, one out of four had at least one episode of major depression in her lifetime. For men, the figures are one out of ten. However, recent studies have found that among those couples involved in marriages of

shared household responsibility the rate of depression among wives has decreased (Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber, "Dividing Work").

Rights and Responsibilities

Consultation

We come to the fundamental focus of this article regarding the rights and responsibilities in the Bahá'í family system and the promotion of equality between women and men. A primary responsibility of the Bahá'í family is the elimination of the current sex-role stereotypes and inequities that place both men and women at a disadvantage. The ongoing rigid social habits, opinions, and imposed roles that confine women and men within a false categorization have become a source of conflict and dissension. The Bahá'í family system intends to remove such condescending behaviors that promote inequality and injustice. The mechanism to be implemented in eliminating sex-role stereotypes is the thorough application of spiritual principles and their manifestation in the actions of individual members within the family. The task of socializing family members to internalize and to champion the values of equality and harmony is pivotal in bringing about social change within the society at large. To this end, Bahá'u'lláh has given humankind the art of consultation as a powerful instrument to be used toward the goal of unity and equality. He writes:

Say: no man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation. (Quoted in *Consultation* 1)

The potency of the principle of consultation in relation to the development of unity and the spirit with which consultation should be exercised in interpersonal interactions is further expounded upon in the following statement:

If they agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce the demolition of the divine foundation. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* 411)

Within the family system, the practice of consultation can have a profound influence upon the development of unity. The Bahá'í teachings specify the "rules of conduct to govern the relationships of husbands and wives" in the following statement:

For example 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. (Universal House of Justice, quoted in *Women* 33)

Once the essence of consultation is learned in the family milieu, transference of this skill to the rest of the institutions within society becomes a logical extension.

Bahá'í consultation demands a certain set of requirements from each individual. "The prime requisites for them that take counsel together," according to the Bahá'í writings, "are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 87).

Within the Bahá'í family environment, children become exposed to the consultative process and see it modeled in the actions of their parents. In the case of husband and wife, however, the role of consultation becomes even more crucial since there can be no majority opinion or vote on certain issues. It is precisely for such times, when mutual agreement is not attainable by the couple, that the Bahá'í guidelines state there are "times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other" (Universal House of Justice, quoted in *Bahá'í Marriage* 59). This guidance clearly implies that neither partner in a marriage should resort to controlling, domineering, or authoritarian behavior over the other. It also calls for patience, forbearance, and discipline on the part of both partners, especially at times when shared agreement is not possible.

Kantor and Lehr's study on the three distinctive types of family systems lends support to the value of the consultative model. The open-type families, according to Kantor and Lehr, stress agreement in the opinions and feelings among family members. According to the authors:

Members are encouraged to reveal their honest feelings and thoughts to each other. Feelings of all kinds are permissible, as long as they are true ones. Members may communicate a greater intensity as well as a larger range of emotions than can those in a closed system. In addition, emotions may be more readily tapped. If a member is not showing his or her feelings, others are free to ask him to do so.... Its emotional mandate is to share and not withhold whatever is being felt. Ecstasy in sum, responsibility, authenticity, and the legitimacy of emotional latitude are the open system's major affect ideals. (Kantor and Lehr, *Inside Families* 145)

In this type of family system there is high self-esteem; communication is precise, clear, direct, and honest. The rules of the family are open and subject to change as the need arises, and family members comment freely on matters relevant to the family system.

The second family system is the closed type in which family rules are concealed and rigid, and the family members must conform to these rules. Communication is unclear and indirect with a tendency to blame, to distract, and to appear unemotional. Satir reports that this type of family promotes low self-esteem among its members (*New Peoplemaking*). The third type of family system is the random type, which places stress on individual expression and freedom with no general rules adhered to by the members of the family. In this type of system, there is little family unity and low self-esteem. The open-type communication style most closely parallels the Bahá'í family consultation model, and its advantages in promoting self-esteem, open communication, and family cohesion are evident.

Relevant to the overall principle of Bahá'í consultation is another crucial component of the development of a proper climate of communication and social interaction in both a Bahá'í family and the larger community—that of the equality of men and women. The application of consultation not only directly influences our ability to strengthen the bond of unity but also promotes the development of equality between the sexes. Shoghi Effendi explains this process in the following way: "...the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation" (*Bahá'í Administration* 63–64).

The Role of Mother and Father

To ensure the stability and cohesion of the institution of marriage and family, the Bahá'í family system offers a set of principles regarding the duties and responsibilities of the mother and father. In the Bahá'í family, the father has primary economic responsibility. The Universal House of Justice has expounded on this point, stating that "the father can be regarded as the 'head' of the family" (quoted in *Bahá'í Marriage* 57). However, in another statement, the flexibility of this responsibility within the family system is elaborated by the Universal House of Justice: "Similarly, although the primary responsibility for supporting the family financially is placed upon the husband, this does not by any means imply that the place of women is confined to the home" (quoted in *Women* 33).

The mother, according to Bahá'í teachings, is the first educator of children. In this capacity, mothers are accorded an equally important responsibility, complementing the husband's role as the head of the household. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, states: "O ye loving mothers, know ye that in God's sight; the best of all ways to worship Him is to educate the children and train them in all the perfections of humankind; and no nobler deed than this can be imagined" (*Selections* 139). The biological differences between women and men bring further specificity to this role. That is, it is the mother who bears the child, nurses the child, and during those early days and months after birth, develops a strong bond with the child: "The task of bringing up a Bahá'í child, as emphasized time and again in Bahá'í Writings, is the chief responsibility of the mother, whose unique privilege is indeed to create in her home such conditions as would be most conducive to both his material and spiritual welfare and advancement. The training which the child first receives through his mother constitutes the strongest foundation for his future development" (from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *Bahá'í Marriage* 58).

The House of Justice elaborates upon the roles and responsibilities within the family stating that a "corollary of this responsibility of the mother is her right to be supported by her husband—a husband has no explicit right to be supported by his wife" (quoted in *Bahá'í Marriage* 58).

The responsibilities of the members of a Bahá'í family are clearly delineated in the Bahá'í writings in order to strengthen the family bond. Furthermore, it is important to be cognizant that such roles and responsibilities are also placed in the context of the principle of the equality of the sexes. This matter is significant to the well-being of contemporary families, since it protects the individual rights of all family members. For example, the principle of

the equality between men and women is forcefully stated by the Universal House of Justice in relation to the role of parents during the early stages of a child's development:

With regard to your question whether mothers should work outside the home, it is helpful to consider the matter from the perspective of the concept of a Bahá'í family. This concept is based on the principle that the man has primary responsibility for the financial support of the family, and the woman is the chief and primary educator of the children. This by no means implies that these functions are inflexibly fixed and cannot be changed and adjusted to suit particular family situations, nor does it mean that the place of the woman is confined to the home. Rather, while primary responsibility is assigned, it is anticipated that fathers would play a significant role in the education of the children and women could also be breadwinners. (Quoted in *Women* 33–34)

Thus, in the Bahá'í context, equality between women and men means complementary rather than identical functions.

Furthermore, both the father and mother have the “inescapable duty to educate their children—but not vice versa; the children have the duty to obey their parents—the parents do not obey the children...” (Universal House of Justice, quoted in *Bahá'í Marriage* 57–58). However, the importance of the father's role in relation to his children's education is clearly explained in the Bahá'í teachings: “...although the mother is the first educator of the child, and the most important formative influence in his development,” writes the Universal House of Justice, “the father also has the responsibility of educating his children, and this responsibility is so weighty that Bahá'u'lláh has stated that a father who fails to exercise it forfeits his rights of fatherhood” (quoted in *Women* 32–33).

Conclusion

From the principles enunciated in the Bahá'í Faith, it is evident that the institution of marriage and family must be strengthened. To attain this objective, the need for the application of the principle of equality between men and women is of paramount importance. This principle underlies the specific rights and responsibilities that are assigned within the Bahá'í family system. Combined with the important principle of Bahá'í consultation, the Bahá'í family emerges as a basic unit of society in which the rights of each member are respected and preserved.

Beyond its necessity within the family, the realization of the equality between women and men has far-reaching implications for the development of society at large. According to the Bahá'í principles, “... the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is one of the most important, though less acknowledged prerequisites of peace” (Universal House of Justice, “To the Peoples” 13). The need for the achievement of this principle is further expounded upon by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in the following statement: “The most momentous question of this day is international peace and arbitration, and universal peace is impossible without universal suffrage” (*Promulgation* 134). And in yet another statement on the subject, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá exhorts: “Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible” (*Promulgation* 76).

Although the Bahá'í family is the agent of socialization responsible for providing the example and educating its members in the understanding of the equality between the sexes, it is not only within the family unit that equality of the sexes is required. The realization of this principle coincides with major social changes within the larger society: “...there is a much wider sphere of relationships between men and women than in the home,” writes the Universal House of Justice, “and this too we should consider in the context of Bahá'í society, not in that of past or present social norms” (quoted in *Women* 41–42). ‘Abdu'l-Bahá has stated: “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* 182).

Finally, as a result of the application of Bahá'í principles to the family system, this institution will itself experience major changes. These changes should be considered in relation to the larger goal of the Bahá'í Faith—the unification of the world and all its people. Shoghi Effendi explains this awesome goal by stating that

the unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. (*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 203)

The family, being the foundation of human society, plays a significant role in the unfoldment of these major global changes. The Bahá'í family, through the proper respect, love, and nurturance of its members, as well as

through the application and development of Bahá'í principles, serves as a major catalyst toward the spiritualization and transformation of society. At a time in human history when the institution of marriage and family is in decline, the emergence of the Bahá'í model provides a sound basis for the renewal of the institution of the family.

To this end, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, describes the vital role and relationship of the family to the larger society and the world. He writes:

Compare the nations of the world to the members of a family. A family is a nation in miniature. Simply enlarge the circle of the household, and you have the nation. Enlarge the circle of nations, and you have all humanity. The conditions surrounding the family surround the nation. The happenings in the family are the happenings in the life of the nation. Would it add to the progress and advancement of a family if dissensions should arise among its members, all fighting, pillaging each other, jealous and revengeful of injury, seeking selfish advantage? Nay, this would be the cause of the effacement of progress and advancement. So it is in the great family of nations, for nations are but an aggregate of families. (*Promulgation* 157)

To the degree that we are willing to invest our efforts in the development of a healthy family system, to the degree that we are willing to self-sacrifice in order to work diligently toward the evolution of a social system where both women and men will be liberated to enjoy equality of status and where each member of the family unit will become socialized through spiritual principles to serve society, to that degree will we be able to assist the institution of marriage and the family in its progress toward the development of a new society based on the spiritual laws of God, which will guide the affairs of the peoples of the world.

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