



Australian Bahá'í Community Office for Equality

Commission on the Status of Women 48th Session The Role of Men and Boys in Gender Equality

1. Do women's groups believe this is an important issue that requires greater attention and action?

"When men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights."¹

The Australian Bahá'í Community Office for Equality believes that men have an inescapable duty to promote equality. In our view, the role of men and boys in gender equality is of critical importance and requires far greater attention and action.

The Bahá'í Faith is committed to the establishment of justice and peace on earth. Fundamental to the Bahá'í world-view is the concept of the oneness of the human race, of which the equality of men and women is a vital and clearly stated spiritual and social principle, essential to human progress and the transformation of society.

The principle of equality has profound implications for the definition of the roles of both women and men and impinges on all aspects of human relations. The application of this principle must necessarily entail a change in many traditional habits and practices and allows for the evolution of the roles not only of women but also of men.

While women must develop their capacities and step forward to play an active role in solving the world's problems, the impact of their actions will be limited without the full cooperation of men. Women working together in unity and harmony have already achieved a great deal within the spheres of influence open to them. When men lend their full support to this process, welcoming women into all fields of human endeavour, valuing their contributions, and encouraging and supporting their participation, men and women together will help create the moral and psychological climate in which peace can emerge and an environmentally sustainable civilization can advance and flourish.

As recognised in the Australian Government Office of the Status of Women Background Paper: "The role of men and boys in gender equality", the vast majority

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*, 12th ed, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1995, 50.14.

of decision-makers in the community are still overwhelmingly men. Our society's ability to achieve real progress in advancing equality is thus heavily dependent on men. Clearly, raising the consciousness and expectations of women, although vital, is not sufficient to accomplish extensive changes in the status of women. Any effort to promote improvement in the status of women in a comprehensive and multi-sectoral way must necessarily involve changes in men's thought and behaviour. These changes in men must become manifest in decisions and actions which reflect their commitment to relate to women in new ways.

In their recent work on violence against women, Penn and Nardos² have suggested that men must shoulder a greater share of the burden in seeking to advance the rights of women on all fronts. They note that the civil rights movement in the United States gained steam in the mid-1960s when whites began to get involved and suggest that the same process of invigoration can occur when men become more involved in the women's movement.

The Bahá'í writings state, "the assumption of superiority by man will continue to be depressing to the ambition of woman, woman's aspiration towards advancement will be checked by it"³. On the other hand, the willingness of men to take responsibility for equality will create an optimum environment for progress.

The Australian Bahá'í Community Office for Equality echoes the view put forward a decade ago in a joint NGO paper to the Commission on the Status of Women which stated, "Improving the status of women is not a women's issue - it is a human issue – and it is time to call men into action in this arena".⁴

² Michael L. Penn and Rahel Nardos, *Overcoming Violence against Women and Girls: The International Campaign to Eradicate a Worldwide Problem*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Lanham, Maryland, USA, 2003

³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace, Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1982, p 76

⁴ *Women and Men in Partnership*, Joint statement to the 37th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Agenda Item: Preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women. Signed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC): All India Women's Conference, Bahá'í International Community, Gray Panthers, International Association for Religious Freedom, International Council of Nurses, International Council on Social Welfare, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, International Federation of University Women, International Federation of Women Lawyers, International Union of Family Organizations, New/Fourth World Movement, Population Communication International, Pan-Pacific South East Asian Women's Association (PPSEAWA), Society for International Development, Soroptimist International, Trickle-Up Program, Women's International Democratic Federation, Women's International Zionist Organization, World Federation of Mental Health, World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEPE), World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, Vienna, Austria, March 1993

2. Do you know of any men's groups that are involved in promoting gender equality in Australia? If so, what work are they doing?

In 2002 the Australian Bahá'í Community established an agency, the Office for Equality, through which men are involved in promoting gender equality. While the men of the Office are able to convene and meet separately to address sensitive issues of concern to their sex, as indeed are the women of the Office, the majority of the Office's work is undertaken in partnership between men and women.

The decision for men to be engaged in the process of promoting gender equality followed extensive consultations in 2001 with women and men in the Bahá'í community, in every state and territory of Australia, conducted by the National Coordinator of the then Australian Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women. The consultations addressed the approach of the Bahá'í community in Australia towards the advancement of women. Those participating in the consultations expressed mixed perceptions of the meaning of equality but the overwhelming majority felt that women and men should work together to advance gender equality.

The Office for Equality supports Bahá'ís in implementing the principle of the equality of women and men and promoting such equality within the wider community. It is made up of a small national coordinating committee, with male and female membership, and a network comprising at least one male and female representative of each state and territory. In many states a network of men and women at local level work with the state Office for Equality representatives. The membership of the Office for Equality reflects the cultural diversity of the Australian Bahá'í community.

While the Office for Equality is only in its infancy, the model is showing initial signs of success as a means of engaging men in the process of achieving gender equality. In its first eighteen months, the Office has worked to develop, adapt and pilot programs to raise awareness of equality and build unity of vision among men and women. These pilots have given the Office a sense of optimism about the potential for women and men to work in partnership to advance equality. The following are some of the activities undertaken:

- "Equal Wings" - An empowerment program, developed in Malaysia and tested widely in Asia, the Pacific and Africa, was piloted in a major metropolitan city. Using drama, small group consultations, interactive exercises and humour, "Equal Wings" involves men and women, couples and singles. In the initial workshops, women and men are separated and work through similar worksheets but often with very different results. Once the issues have been brought up and the concepts clarified, men and women join in the same workshops. The pilot proved that with minor modification, "Equal Wings" is suitable in a developed urban environment and that men and women who complete the workshops become more aware and more inspired to work

towards building positive relationships between the sexes. The Office intends to make the program available on a national basis.

- Equality Leads to Unity Workshops - Workshops encouraging the participation of both women and men were held in three states to increase awareness, knowledge and understanding of issues around equality, to develop tools and strategies for increasing equality in local communities and to provide opportunities for networking. Presentations were made on topics such as “Equality from a Multicultural Perspective” and “Equality from a Youth Perspective”. A key component of the workshops was a cause and effect exercise, which addressed the question - "What are the barriers that prevent us from achieving greater equality"? This exercise assisted participants to identify the main causes of inequality in local communities and the effects this has on the development of the human family and society.
- Leadership Program – The Office identified a need for a leadership program for women that develops competencies in leadership. In the process of developing the program, it has become apparent that it would be more valuable to develop a generic leadership program that could be adapted for a women’s only group if needed. As well as providing for specific skill development, the program will give men and women a greater understanding of service-oriented leadership and of the qualities and capacities that both sexes can bring to leadership. The program will be piloted in November 2003.
- Arts - The Office has worked with youth in central Australia to prepare an arts based workshop on equality for the indigenous community. Art has also been used as a means of raising awareness of equality among children and youth.
- “Happy Hippo Show” – The Office is currently developing a pilot of the “Happy Hippo Show” as a way of building awareness of equality among men and women in Australian communities, particularly among youth. The “Happy Hippo Show” concept was created by Shamil Fattakhov, in the USSR. It uses drama, in which characters are taken to the threshold of an important moral decision, to engage the audience in a discussion of what step the actors should take next. The emphasis is on achieving a positive moral outcome through consultation, based on the following principles: 1) understanding that positive solutions are indeed possible; 2) defining the highest moral principle involved; 3) focusing on practical ways to solve problems; and 4) leading the audience through a shared experience of different cultures and points of view. The Office is optimistic about its applicability to the advancement of gender equality in Australian communities.

The Office now plans to broaden the scope of its awareness raising activities, to formally evaluate its progress and to begin to address the increased need for education, skills and knowledge that has been created by the pilot programs.

3. How can male decision-makers better contribute to the achievement of gender equality in Australia?

Once they have accepted the need to be engaged in this process, male decision-makers can play a critical role by offering moral and practical support to the efforts of individuals and a range of agencies and institutions within our society to advance gender equality. In the family, the workplace, educational institutions, government, agencies of civil society and the community at large, male decision makers who welcome women into all fields of human endeavour, value their contributions and encourage and support their participation, will change the lives of those women and men who are directly affected by their decisions. Equally, if not more importantly, through their actions, such male decision-makers also will help to model new modes of behaviour and spread attitudinal change to support greater equality throughout our community.

No attempt to address gender equality issues can ignore religion and the role of religious leaders. The Beijing Platform for Action (paragraph 24) noted, "Religion, spirituality and belief play a central role in the lives of millions of women and men, in the way they live and in the aspirations they have for the future. Religion, thought, conscience and belief may, and can, contribute to fulfilling women's and men's moral, ethical and spiritual needs and to realizing their full potential in society. However, it is acknowledged that any form of extremism may have a negative impact on women and can lead to violence and discrimination". Religious leaders, who are predominantly men, have a special responsibility to reaffirm those spiritual principles that bring unity and to take a stronger role in opposing those aspects of religious fundamentalism that have contributed to the subordination of women. For example, the admonition that we should treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated can be found in the teachings of every religion. Were this principle to guide all interactions, including those between men and women, many harmful traditional beliefs and practices would gradually be relinquished.

The positive potential of the media in addressing gender equality has gone largely untapped. Decision-makers within the media could play a positive role by encouraging positive social values in boys and girls and improving the ways in which women are portrayed. They could promote the ideas that women and girls deserve equal rights, that society's progress depends on the full participation of women, that girls are as capable as boys, and that women are a powerful force for peace.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, the term of which has now expired, offered one model of the engagement of leaders from business, religion, government, community organisations, the media, unions and other bodies in efforts to address inequalities between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The Council and its advisory groups showed the potential for involving leaders from our society in processes of social change.

4. How can the Government engage more men in activities to achieve gender equality?

*"As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs."*⁵

Increasing men's understanding of the benefits that gender equality will bring to them specifically, and to our world as a whole, is a key to engaging more men in activities to achieve such equality. These benefits were clearly stated in the *Beijing Platform for Action* (paragraph 41): "The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and should not be seen in isolation as a women's issue. They are the only way to build a sustainable, just and developed society. Empowerment of women and equality between women and men are prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all peoples".

The Bahá'í Community considers that the achievement of gender equality is vital to the full development of men. The negative effects of inequality prevent men from maturing and developing the qualities necessary to meet the challenges of the new millennium. Inequality promotes destructive attitudes and habits that pass from the family to the workplace, to political life and ultimately to international relations. The achievement of equality between the sexes, on the other hand, is essential to human progress. This is conveyed in the Bahá'í writings in the image of a bird;

*"The world of humanity is possessed of two wings — the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realised".*⁶

Thus we suggest that awareness raising activities and other efforts to develop a greater understanding that gender equality is necessary for our nation to establish social justice and to contribute to global peace, as well as of the benefits of gender equality for both men and women, would be a strong motivating force in engaging more men in activities to achieve gender equality.

In the context of engaging men in activities to achieve equality, it is also important to recognise the link between the protection and promotion of women's rights and the protection and promotion of human rights in general. The *Beijing Platform for Action* (paragraph 2) stated "that the human rights of women and of the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. As an agenda for action, the Platform seeks to promote and protect the full enjoyment of all human rights and the fundamental freedoms of all women throughout their life cycle." To this end, measures to foster human rights education take on significance. Systematic programs of human rights education constitute an essential tool for the promotion and implementation of international human rights standards and serve as a vehicle for promoting awareness of human rights and responsibilities, and inducing a motivation

⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* op cit, 40.33

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, op cit, p 375

in the hearts and minds of individuals, both men and women, to take action to ensure their protection and advancement.

The general lack of awareness of human rights among men and women is an obstacle to their full protection. To produce a more profound effect on community well-being, the discussion of human rights needs to be moved from the arena of legal and political policy making to the local community, where the lives of individuals will be touched and lasting changes can be made. The Plan of Action prepared by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) defines human rights education as "training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes". Human rights education, if it is to succeed, must seek to transform individual attitudes and behaviour and thereby establish a new "culture" of respect for human rights. Only such a change in the fundamental social outlook of every individual, whether a government official or an ordinary citizen, can bring about the universal observance of human rights principles in the daily lives of women and men. In the final analysis, the human rights of an individual are respected and protected - or violated - by other individuals, even if they are acting in an official capacity. Accordingly, it is essential to touch the hearts, and elevate the behaviour, of all human beings, if, in the words of the Plan of Action, human rights are to be transformed "from the expression of abstract norms" to the "reality" of the "social, economic, cultural and political conditions" experienced by people in their daily lives.

The Australian Government already has demonstrated its commitment to the concept of human rights education; for example, in its support of the activities of the National Committee on Human Rights Education. It is suggested that further support of human rights education in Australia will complement other measures to engage men in advancing gender equality.

5. What do you see as working well to engage men and boys in gender equality in Australia and overseas? Please specify and provide detail.

“ Here in the village men and women were not used to working together but through the project I was surprised to see that they are working hand in hand. I personally have witnessed a change in my way of life.”⁷

In a joint statement to the 37th Session of CSW, a group of non-government organisations noted, “Growing numbers of NGOs are mobilizing women and men to create and strengthen genuine partnerships through action along the following lines:

- a. Making men more aware of their responsibility to actively promote equal rights and opportunities for women and to prepare themselves for effective partnership with women in this effort;
- b. Identifying individuals and groups already committed to equality and partnership and enhancing their efforts;
- c. Promoting research and reflection on gender roles, barriers to equality, differing communications styles and value systems, methods for promoting effective interaction and active partnerships across gender lines;
- d. Providing opportunities for the free, full and frank exchange of views and experiences through conferences, institutes, symposia, etc.; and
- e. Promoting the use of the arts to explore, clarify and communicate about these issues”⁸

Bringing about attitudinal change is critical to this process, as demonstrated in a two-year project called “Traditional Media as Change Agent”⁹ conducted in Bolivia, Cameroon and Malaysia by UNIFEM and the Bahá’í Office for the Advancement of Women, with Bahá’í sponsored extensions in Brazil and Nigeria. The "Traditional Media as Change Agent" project had as its primary goal the improvement and enhancement of women's status in the community. Its premise was that women's status is defined through the complex web of social, cultural and religious values superimposed on labour needs in a community. To change women's status, therefore, requires more than simply altering some aspect of labour activity, or even increasing income. It requires a re-evaluation by the community itself of its core values, assessing them in light of their present and future needs. It also requires a great deal of consultation with men, who, as monitors of the status quo in their communities, need to be convinced that change in women's status is beneficial for the general good of the community, even if it causes short-term hardships. The project chose to use traditional media as a means of exploring how these values came into being and how

⁷ Male quoted in A Boyles, “Towards the Goal of True Partnership” *Bahá’í World*, 1993-94, p 257

⁸ *Women and Men in Partnership*, op cit.

⁹ “UNIFEM/ Bahá’í Project Raises Community Consciousness”, *One Country*, October-December, Vol 5, Issue 3, 1993

they function within present society because they are vehicles by which societies reinforce and shape values. The project then worked with communities in shaping their vision of the future and how women fit into that vision, as participators and producers, not as victims. Statistical and anecdotal evidence indicates the success of the project¹⁰.

The experience of the Bahá'í community is that through such programs it is possible to transform traditional prejudices and long held discriminatory attitudes and practices in parts of the world where women have been, at best, invisible and, more frequently, greatly oppressed. Our initial experience in Australia of grass roots activities for men and women, which raise awareness, provide information and give those involved the opportunity to create and strengthen genuine partnerships, leads us to believe that such an approach will also be effective here. Specific activities have been outlined previously.

¹⁰ Janet A. Khan and Peter J. Khan, "*Advancement of Women*", Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1998, pp 258-261

6. What do you think are the most important strategies / issues that Australia should focus on during negotiations at CSW?

There are a plethora of approaches that can be adopted to involve men and boys in achieving gender equality. Some examples include:

1. Gathering and analysing new and existing data on types and scope of gender inequality for use in policy-making
2. Consolidating and disseminating information on successful models of equality
3. Providing support and training for families, social workers etc in the prevention of gender inequality
4. Sensitising police, judiciary and policy makers regarding the social consequences of inequality and training them in preventive strategies
5. Developing gender-sensitive materials, texts, toys etc for dissemination in doctors' offices, community and day-care centres and wherever families are present
6. Providing gender training for teachers, highlighting the development of emotional intelligence competencies
7. Creating public awareness through all forms of media and existing community networks, presenting gender inequality as a problem with serious consequences
8. Promoting classes for boys and girls to develop an egalitarian approach to parenting and other roles
9. Continuing to educate women and men, boys and girls about the richness of equality in their lives and celebrating complementarity and diversity.
10. Providing programs for families aimed at empowering the most vulnerable members and reinforcing existing family strengths.

Most recently, Connell has outlined a comprehensive set of strategies as part of his proposed policy framework¹¹.

The Australian Bahá'í Community Office for Equality suggests that at this time, the most important strategy is to develop and implement programs which aim to transform individual attitudes and behaviour while giving women and men the skills and opportunity to create and strengthen partnerships in the family, in the workplace, in schools, in government, and in society at large. We believe that such programs should be based on:

- Instilling and enhancing individual and community understanding of the principle of gender equality
- Encouraging the adoption of the value of equality and its practice
- Providing opportunities for women and men to put the principle into action
- Gaining community support for implementing the principle in individual and social life.

¹¹ R W Connell, *The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality*, EGM/Men-Boys-GE/2003/BP.1, 7 October 2003, p 26

The Beijing Platform for Action (Paragraph 40) stated, “It will be critical for the international community to demonstrate a new commitment to the future - a commitment to inspiring a new generation of women and men to work together for a more just society. This new generation of leaders must accept and promote a world in which every child is free from injustice, oppression and inequality and free to develop her/his own potential. The principle of equality of women and men must therefore be integral to the socialization process”. We recommend that attention be given to the education of men and women, boys and girls, in cooperative approaches involving respect for the potential realisation of the highest qualities in every human being.

The Office for the Status of Women’s paper noted, “the attitudes and behaviours of many men/boys is considered to be a central cause of gender inequality”. We wholeheartedly support special programs for the development of women, and our teachings give priority to the education of the girl-child, but special programs are needed which educate men in the equality of the sexes. Without such education, leading men to acceptance of and commitment to gender equality, our efforts to promote equality will ultimately fail, since the healthy condition of society requires the shared contribution of both men and women. Boys must be raised with an understanding of the equality of women and men and be prepared to work together with women as equal partners in all fields of human endeavour. Failure to educate boys for equality will have devastating consequences not only for girls, but also for society as a whole. Because the attitude of superiority, fostered in men by erroneous beliefs, is often unconscious, programs should be instituted to sensitise males, both boys and men, to the ways in which they may unknowingly discourage girls and block their progress. Men need to be educated on the issues so that they are encouraged to modify their attitudes and behaviours to prepare them to work as genuine partners with women.

7. What do you think are the most important issues relating to the men and boys theme?

“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”¹²

The Office for the Status of Women’s background paper identifies the following as key issues facing the Commission on the Status of Women; unequal power relations between women and men, gender stereotypes and socialisation processes as challenges to the achievement of gender equality. We agree that these are important issues and suggest that a focus on partnership as a process as well as an end result is a key issue underpinning these other issues.

The opening paragraph of the *Beijing Platform for Action* states, “the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities...A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centred sustainable development. A sustained and long-term commitment is essential, so that women and men can work together for themselves, for their children and for society to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.” Paragraph 3 continues “The Platform for Action emphasizes that women share common concerns that can be addressed only by working together and in partnership with men towards the common goal of gender equality around the world.”

Connell notes, “Many people find it hard to imagine an alliance of men and women for gender equality, and there are real difficulties in the way of such alliances.... Nevertheless, some feminists argue that alliances for change between women and men are possible, even crucial for achieving gender equality”¹³. The Australian Bahá’í Community Office for Equality lends its voice to those calling for partnership between men and women as a way to achieve gender equality. We suggest that while the importance of the concept of partnership has been identified in international fora, there is a critical need to increase general awareness and understanding of the concept of partnership between men and women. This awareness-raising needs to focus as much on partnership as an approach to gender equality as it does on partnership as the end result or manifestation of such equality.

Too often, gender relations, analysis of gender issues and the quest for gender equality have been based on an adversarial approach rooted in gender prejudice. As noted in an analysis of US society, “the damaging effects of gender prejudice are a fault line beneath the foundation of our national life. The gains for women rest uneasily on unchanged, often unexamined, inherited assumptions. Much remains to be done”.¹⁴ Once again, we refer to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, which offered one model of a non-adversarial approach to raising awareness of, and engaging the community in, the resolution of inequality.

¹² Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, 1986

¹³ R W Connell, *ibid*, pp 30-32

¹⁴ *Two Wings of a Bird*, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1997, p 2

Working towards “transformed partnership” will undoubtedly be difficult for both men and women because both must re-evaluate what is familiar and routine. Men must encourage and facilitate the full development of women, as women must support men in their development towards this new condition of society. Blame must be relinquished because no individual can be faulted for having been shaped by historical and sociological forces. Guilt must be shed in favour of responsibility for growth. Full gender equality requires a new understanding of who we are, what is our purpose in life, and how we relate to one another – an understanding that will compel us to reshape our lives and thereby our society.

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