



## Australian Bahá'í Community

### ***SUBMISSION TO INFORM THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL PLAN TO REDUCE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN***

#### **1. WHY IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT HAPPENING IN AUSTRALIA?**

Domestic violence and sexual assault are a yardstick of the degree to which our society is governed by aggression, dominated by competition and ruled by force.

The occurrence of domestic violence and sexual assault in Australia is part of an international phenomenon, deeply rooted in cultural and religious gender bias, and supported – even institutionalised – by patriarchal societies worldwide.

In a statement published in 2006, the Bahá'í International Community observed:

*A relentless epidemic of violence against women and girls—perpetuated by social norms, religious fanaticism, and exploitative economic and political conditions—continues to wreak havoc in every corner of the world<sup>1</sup>.*

The symptoms of this global epidemic are depressingly familiar: women and girls are trafficked every year and subjected to forced prostitution and slavery-like conditions; migrant workers face a double marginalization as females and as migrants, suffering mental, physical and economic abuse at the hands of their employers in an informal economy; violence against older women, whose numbers have risen and who often lack the means for self-protection, has increased; and child pornography has spread like a virus feeding the appetite of a seamless, unregulated global market.

As the Bahá'í International Community observed, the continuing occurrence of domestic violence reflects not just inadequate legal mechanisms for dealing with such crimes, but also cultural and moral deficiencies:

*As the international community struggles to implement laws to protect women and girls, it is evident that a massive divide still separates the legal apparatus and the culture—embodied in our values, behaviours and institutions—required to stem the epidemic<sup>2</sup>*

All adults in the community— educators, health workers, entrepreneurs, political representatives, religious leaders, police officers, media professionals and the like— share a responsibility for the protection of women and children. But our society has failed to cultivate the necessary moral capacity to prevent individuals from exploiting the life and dignity of others in the first place. Domestic violence and sexual assault will continue to occur in Australia until we create the social, material and structural

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<sup>1</sup> *Beyond Legal Reforms: Culture and Capacity in the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls*, Bahá'í International Community, July 2006, p 1

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

conditions in which women and girls can develop to their full potential. The creation of such conditions involves not only deliberate attempts to change the legal, political and economic structures of society, but, equally importantly, requires the transformation of individuals—men and women, boys and girls—whose values, in different ways, sustain exploitative patterns of behaviour. This submission is primarily directed to the question of such transformation.

## **2. WHAT RESOURCES, PROGRAMS OR SERVICES ARE YOU AWARE OF THAT ARE SUCCESSFUL IN PREVENTING OR REDUCING THE EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE OR SEXUAL ASSAULT?**

From the Bahá'í Community's perspective, the essence of any successful program of social change, including those programs which aim to prevent all forms of violence against women and children, is the understanding that the individual has a spiritual or moral dimension which shapes their understanding of their life's purpose and their responsibilities towards their family, their community and the world. Alongside critical changes in the legal, political and economic architecture slowly taking shape, the development of individuals' moral and spiritual capabilities is an essential element in the quest to prevent violence against women and children.

We appreciate that the idea of promoting specific morals or values may be a controversial one; too often in the past such efforts have been associated with repressive religious practices, oppressive political ideologies and narrowly defined visions of the common good. Moral capabilities, however, when articulated in a manner consistent with the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and aimed at fostering the spiritual, social and intellectual development of all persons, represent a key element of the kind of transformation required for a non-violent society to take shape. Moreover, such capabilities must be anchored in the central social and spiritual principle of our time - namely the interdependence and interconnectedness of humanity as a whole. The goal of moral development, then, is shifted from individualistic notions of 'salvation' to embrace the collective progress of the entire human race. As our understanding of the world's social and physical systems has evolved to embrace this paradigm, so too must we develop the moral capabilities required to function ethically in the age in which we live.

A new component of the Australian Bahá'í Community's efforts to end violence against women is the development of a moral empowerment program for junior youth (12–15 years of age). Although in its early stages of development and implementation, the program is designed to enable junior youth, both boys and girls, to develop a strong sense of purpose and become empowered to reach their potential, while contributing to the advancement of society.

The junior youth program provides special attention to developing the ability to:

- participate effectively in non-adversarial collective decision-making (this includes the transformation of exploitative patterns of behaviour based on the use of force and falsely rooted in the idea of conflict as a mainstay of human interaction);
- act with rectitude of conduct based on ethical and moral principles;
- cultivate one's sense of dignity and self-worth;
- take initiative in a creative, disciplined form;

- commit to empowering educational activities;
- create a vision of a desired future based on shared values and principles, and inspire others to work for its fulfilment;
- understand relationships based on dominance and to contribute towards their transformation into relationships based on reciprocity and service.

In this way, the program seeks to develop the individual as a whole—integrating the spiritual and the material, the theoretical and the practical and the sense of individual progress with service to the community.

The program also looks at personal transformation as a powerful factor in achieving social transformation. For example, raising awareness of world citizenship is considered a preparation for achieving unity in a world free from religious, racial or gender prejudices. By focusing on higher ideals, such as service to humanity, it is expected that the junior youth will transcend personal concerns to reach out to others as opposed to excessive self-indulgence. Through various community service projects that the junior youth devise themselves, they learn to build a community spirit of service and giving.

Although it would be premature to describe the junior youth program as successful, the initial results make us optimistic about its potential. We hope to build up our resources to make junior youth groups more widely available over time.

### **3. WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO FAMILY SAFETY FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIA?**

Answered in response to other questions.

### **4. WHAT SUGGESTIONS DO YOU HAVE TO REDUCE DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN?**

#### **Developing Moral Capabilities**

Efforts to eradicate violence against women and children must proceed from and be reinforced by every level of society, from the individual to the international community. They must not be limited, however, to legal and institutional reforms, for these address only the manifest crime and are incapable of generating the deep-rooted changes needed to create a culture where justice and equality prevail over authoritarian power and physical force. Legal frameworks are essential but must be supported by an emphasis on implementation and prevention. We suggest that the foundation of such measures is a strategy rooted in the education and training of children in a way that enables them to develop morally as well as intellectually, cultivating in them a sense of dignity as well as a responsibility for the wellbeing of their family, their community and the world. (Also see response to question 2)

#### **Engaging Men and Boys**

Effective efforts to end all forms of violence against women and children require the active support of men and a partnership between men and women. The 1995 Beijing Platform of Action underlined the indispensability of the contribution of men and boys

to achieving gender equality. White Ribbon Day has illustrated the potential within Australia to engage men and boys in changing a culture which supports violence against women and children. It seems obvious that if men are to be actively engaged in ending violence against women and children, then consultations on this matter need to be extended to include them.

The problem of violence cannot be resolved unless men and boys are educated to value women and girls as equal partners. In a rapidly changing world, where families find themselves strained under the pressures of shifting environmental, economic and political conditions, the ability to maintain the integrity of the family bond and to prepare children for citizenship in a complex and shrinking world takes on paramount importance. It is imperative, then, to help men as fathers understand their responsibilities in a family to include setting an example of healthy male-female relations, of self-discipline and equal respect for the male and female members of the family.

### **The Role of Religion**

Religions have traditionally played a defining role in cultivating the values of a community, and the support of religious leaders and people of faith needs to be harnessed in the prevention of violence against women and children. Recognising, for example, the role that religious leaders have played as White Ribbon Day ambassadors, more religious leaders must be engaged to end such violence. Religious leaders and people of faith have a special responsibility to reaffirm those spiritual and ethical principles capable of transforming human relationships in a way that allows positive social change.

In considering the role of religion, it must be acknowledged that some voices raised in its name constitute the most formidable obstacle to eradicating violent and exploitative behaviours perpetrated against women and girls. To counter this negative influence, religious practices and doctrines in flagrant violation of international human rights standards must be subject to deeper examination and scrutiny.

### **Human Rights Context**

Violence against women and children must continue to be addressed within a human rights framework. Effective use of a human rights framework to end such violence will require ongoing enforcement of international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It will require ongoing state interventions that protect women and children from abuse and prevent such violations from occurring. It will also require systematic programs of human rights education.

Human rights education, it should be noted, is not limited solely to the provision of information. As defined by the United Nations, it consists of three dimensions:

- (a) Knowledge: provision of information about human rights and mechanisms for their protection;
- (b) Values, beliefs and attitudes: promotion of a human rights culture through the development of values, beliefs and attitudes which uphold human rights; and

- (c) Action: encouragement to take action to defend human rights and prevent human rights abuses.

Education that instils in hearts and minds an awareness of and sensitivity to the human rights of all persons constitutes an essential tool for the promotion and implementation of international human rights standards that by their very nature act against violence against women and children. Australia should build upon its efforts in human rights education to specifically address such violence.

### **International Context**

While the focus of the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children is understandably directed to the national context, it is important not to lose sight of the international context of the global epidemic of violence against women. We suggest that in its efforts to reduce violence against women and children, there is plenty of scope for Australia to help to generate good practice models which can be of value to other nations and to achieve its aspirations to be an international good citizen in its dealings with the United Nations.

Despite its important leadership on the issue of violence against women through the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, its acknowledgement of violence against women and girls as "an obstacle to the achievement of equality, development and peace" and the work of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, the international community has been divided and sluggish to put its words into practice. In 2003, the failure to act was highlighted at the meetings of the 47th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women which, for the first time in the history of the Commission, proved unable to arrive at a set of agreed conclusions regarding violence against women. In this case, cultural and religiously-based arguments were used in an attempt to circumvent countries' obligations as outlined in the 1993 Declaration. It is imperative, therefore, at future meetings of the Commission that decisive language with regards to the elimination of violence against women and girls be adopted as agreed conclusions, setting out not only the legal but moral tone befitting this global epidemic.

To help end violence against women, the international community needs to dramatically increase the power, authority and resources dedicated to women's human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment. The Bahá'í Community is part of discussions that suggest creating an autonomous United Nations agency with a comprehensive mandate dedicated to the full range of women's rights and concerns. These derive from the Beijing Platform for Action, the Cairo Programme of Work, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and ensure that the human rights perspective is fully integrated into all aspects of UN work. To guarantee a voice for women at the highest levels of decision-making at the UN, such an agency should be led by a director with the status of Under Secretary-General. To effectively carry out its mandate, the institution requires a sufficient national presence as well as independent women's rights experts as part of its governing body.

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