



## **Australian Bahá'í Community**

### **Submission in response to selected questions from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission discussion paper, *Striking the Balance: Women, men, work and family***

We thank the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for its comprehensive approach to addressing paid work and family responsibilities in Australia and, in particular, for broadening this discussion to include men as well as women. 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. Bahá'í communities worldwide are striving to put this principle into practice, in their marriages, families, educational programs and in their communities. We share our views and experience in the hope that they will be of assistance in the consideration of some of the issues raised in *Striking the Balance*.

#### **The Australian Bahá'í Community**

The Bahá'í Faith was established in Australia in 1920 and today embraces the diversity of modern Australia. It is a worldwide religion, founded over 160 years ago, with more than five million members around the globe. Inspired by belief in the oneness of humanity, the oneness of religion and the oneness of God, Bahá'ís come together for devotional, community and humanitarian activities in all parts of Australia. The Australian Bahá'í Community is involved in a range of outwardly focussed activities supporting human rights, peace-building, advancement of women, global prosperity and moral development. We are striving to build communities that demonstrate practical solutions to meet the challenges of modern society.

#### ***2. Do women and men need different workplace arrangements to assist them to balance their paid work and family obligations? Why or why not?***

There is widespread evidence that both men and women in Australia are under increasing pressure as they try to balance paid work and family obligations<sup>1</sup>. The negotiation of work and family responsibilities is central in the lives of Australia's men and women, and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see the body of work on the work-family debate by the Australian Institute of Family Studies

it is clear that both men and women need better workplace arrangements to assist them to balance these obligations.

A range of measures, such as readjusting work schedules, job sharing, reducing the hours of work outside the home, extended parental leave, and the like, can assist both mothers and fathers to devote appropriate time and energy to rearing their children or meeting other family responsibilities. As society comes to attach greater importance to home life and the raising of children, other possibilities to assist men and women to balance work and family responsibilities will no doubt be considered and the culture of the workplace will adjust to ensure this balance.

Given the biological role of women as the bearers of children, there is an obvious case to be made for special arrangements for mothers in the period prior to and immediately after the birth of children. As observed by HREOC, “It is generally agreed that the physical and emotional demands of childbirth require a period of recovery and adaptation. A number of studies examining the health status of women after childbirth have found that many women experience a range of health problems over a number of months following delivery. These health problems are often simply the common effects of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, but they indicate, at the very least, a need for rest and recovery.”<sup>2</sup>

The role of mothers as the primary educators of their children also provides justification for consideration of special arrangements. In the Bahá’í teachings, the function of motherhood is highly valued because the mother is the first educator of the child and education is the key to the advancement of civilisation. That the first educator of the child is the mother should not be startling, for the primary orientation of the infant is to its mother. This provision of nature does in no way minimise the role of the father in the family nor does it mean that the place of the woman is confined to the home. It also does not mean that functions within families are inflexibly fixed and cannot be changed and adjusted to suit particular family situations. It does, however, lead to the conclusion that special workplace arrangements for the mother during her child’s infancy will assist her to fulfil her role as educator. The benefits to society of supporting mothers in this critical role of teaching the new generation are obvious. A particular challenge is to make social and economic provisions for the full and equal participation of women in all aspects of life while simultaneously reinforcing the critical functions of motherhood.

***3. Would equality between men and women require a more equal sharing of paid work?***

***7. Would equality between men and women require a more equal sharing of unpaid work?***

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<sup>2</sup> HREOC *A Time to Value: Proposal for a National Paid Maternity Leave Scheme*, 2002

In order to fully address the issues associated with balancing work and family responsibilities, including the sharing of paid and unpaid work, we need to tackle the challenge of equality between women and men - in the family, in the workplace and in society at large. To be effectively addressed, this challenge must no longer be seen as a “women’s issue” but as a human issue with profound ramifications for the functioning of Australian society.

The principle of equality has profound implications for the definition of the roles of both women and men. It underpins all aspects of human relations and is an integral element in domestic, economic, and community life. It rejects rigid role delineation, patterns of domination and arbitrary decision-making. The application of this principle must necessarily entail a change in many traditional habits and practices and allows for the evolution of the roles within the family, workplace and elsewhere, not only of women but also of men. It follows that a more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work would be part of the application of the principle of equality, although not necessarily reflected in uniform ways in each family. Ideally, each family will achieve its own distinctive approach to such matters, decided through consultation and experience and with the support of appropriate workplace arrangements.

***5. Does the imbalance in sharing of paid and unpaid work by men and women affect children, and if so, how?***

***14. What are the effects on children where their parents have difficulty in balancing paid work with family responsibilities?***

Though most societies and cultures recognize the family as a necessary and fundamental unit, many changes are occurring to threaten its well-being and the happiness of its members. Like the world as a whole, the family is in transition. In every culture, families are disintegrating, fragmenting under pressure of economic and political upheavals and weakening in the face of moral and spiritual confusion. A major pressure facing many families in Australia today is that of balancing work and family responsibilities. This pressure has had significant consequences for our children.

Although children receive formal education at school, it is at home that their character is developed and moral and spiritual attitudes are formed, particularly in their early years. The family remains the basic building block of society and behaviours observed, experienced and learned there are projected onto interactions at all other levels of society.

When women are denied equality and respect in the family, men and boys develop harmful attitudes and habits, which they carry into the workplace, into political life, and ultimately into international relations. When there is an unjust imbalance in the sharing of

paid and unpaid work, or what Susan Moller Okinin describes as “unequal altruism and one-sided self-sacrifice”<sup>3</sup>, children in the family internalise these lessons and values. The implicit or, worse, explicit undervaluing of unpaid work models unhealthy patterns of behaviour that are carried into the next generation. On the other hand, when relations within the family are conducted with due regard for justice and equality, this is an important contribution in bringing about equality, justice and peace in the world. As more and more children grow up in families where the rights of all members are respected and problems are solved with the benefit of open and loving consultation, prospects for peace in the world improve.

For those families able to afford the option, a common response to the challenges of balancing paid and unpaid responsibilities has been to “outsource” the unpaid responsibilities, including childcare. Whether through choice or necessity, many children are relegated to the tertiary level of priority, after parental economic and other interests and pursuits are met. While in no way arguing against the provision of quality childcare as one form of assistance to parents in balancing their family and work responsibilities, we support the view that “no agency – whether governmental, religious, professional, or other – is capable of adequately replacing the family in respect to the all-important task of parenting. Regardless of how well trained and well intentioned these surrogate parents may be, they will never be able to replace that primal state of unity and affinity which naturally exists between parents and their children”<sup>4</sup>.

Children by nature need protection, nurturing, care, guidance, and encouragement. These are the main properties of parental love that ensure the healthy, holistic development of the child. As well, children need models to emulate in order to learn about the qualities of both adulthood and parenthood. “To the degree that these fundamental needs are met, children grow up to be nurturing, caring, enlightened, and encouraging adults and in turn capable, healthy parents... Properly parented children, in turn, as adults are able to create marriages and families characterized by unity, equality, and creativity.”<sup>5</sup>

***20. Is unpaid caring work important for developing social cohesion and social capital? If so, how?***

While not devaluing other forms of unpaid caring work, children are our community’s most precious resource, and unpaid caring work associated with raising children is of immense importance. As stated above, although children receive formal education at

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<sup>3</sup> cited in J A Khan and P J Khan, *Advancement of Women, A Bahá’í Perspective*, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1998, p71

<sup>4</sup> H. B. Danesh, M.D, *The Violence-Free Family: Building Block of Peaceful Civilization*, keynote address at the International Symposium on Strategies for Creating the Violence-Free Family, UNICEF House, New York City, 23-25 May 1994

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

school, it is at home that their character is developed and moral and spiritual attitudes are formed. The family remains the basic building block of society and behaviours observed, experienced and learned there are projected onto interactions at all other levels of society. The function of motherhood is particularly valuable to society because the mother is the first educator of the child and education is the key to the advancement of civilisation.

According to Bahá'í teachings, work performed in a spirit of service, whether paid or unpaid, performed within the family or in the workplace or community, is considered equivalent to serving and worshipping God. Whether in terms of family relationships - where the goal is to serve one's spouse, children and parents - or in terms of the community at large - where one is to promote the well-being of others either through one's profession, trade, business or volunteer community projects - Bahá'ís understand that it is through service to others that we can best develop our own selves and reach the highest levels of human happiness. A society which has the golden rule of do unto others as they would have them do unto you, firmly fixed as the pivot for its social and workplace interactions, will undoubtedly be prosperous and hold the keys to building a united foundation for the well-being of its members.

### ***31. How can Australian workplaces be made more family-friendly?***

A range of measures, such as readjusting work schedules, job sharing, reducing the hours of work, addressing the culture of work places, extended maternity and paternity leaves, home-based work and the like, assist parents to devote appropriate time and energy to rearing their children and other family responsibilities. As an employer, the Australian Bahá'í Community has itself implemented a range of flexible employment conditions that enable many of its employees, men and women alike, to combine active involvement in raising their children and other caring responsibilities with their work. As noted above, as our society comes to attach greater importance to home life and the raising of children, other possibilities to assist men and women to balance work and family responsibilities will no doubt be considered.

To be truly effective, such measures need to be offered within a workplace that values its employees and recognises the importance of family responsibilities in their lives. One study has identified seven essential core values that businesses will need to adopt in order to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: business ethics, corporate social responsibility, sustainable development, partnership of women and men, a new work ethic, consultation in decision-making, and spiritual principles.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> European Baha'i Business Forum, "Emerging Values for a Global Economy", 2001

**36. What are the barriers to changing attitudes towards a more equal division of paid work and family responsibilities?**

A major barrier has been the definition of these matters as “women’s issues”. The Bahá’í Writings state, “When men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights.”<sup>7</sup> While it is largely women who have borne the burden of the inequitable division of paid work and family responsibilities, this inequity has a profound if less recognised impact on the lives of men and children, as well as on society in general. The impact of any attempts to change attitudes will be limited without the full cooperation of men and their “ownership” of the issues. Bahá’ís regard the full development of men and boys as inextricably linked to the advancement of women and we applaud HREOC’s efforts to broaden discussion of work-family matters to include men.

Another related barrier is the tendency to take an adversarial approach in addressing these matters. While understandable, given women’s historic experiences of injustice and inequity, 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. A Bahá’í analysis of US society, with lessons for our own, observed, “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”.<sup>8</sup>

The challenges we face in resolving work-family balance issues in Australia require a different approach that enables the replacement of unequal relationships and tendencies toward domination and aggression with genuine partnerships between the sexes characterized by collaboration and the sharing of resources and decision-making. In the Bahá’í Community’s view, the only adequate resolution of these challenges lies in the concept of partnership between women and men<sup>9</sup>. A society characterized by gender partnership serves the interests of both sexes. It enables men and women to develop in a more balanced and multifaceted way and to discard the rigid role stereotypes so crucial to shifting family dynamics and according women full access to the world of work. It also enables both sexes to recognize each other’s needs, building awareness vital to the resolution of issues associated with balancing work and family responsibilities.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*, 12<sup>th</sup> ed, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, London, 1995, 50.14.

<sup>8</sup> *Two Wings of a Bird*, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1997, p 2

<sup>9</sup> See J A Khan and P J Khan, op cit

A further barrier to changing attitudes is inadequate recognition of the economic and other important value of the family and unpaid family work. We acknowledge the Government's commitment to building family and community capacity through initiatives such as the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and the Family Relationships Services Program. In general, however, the contributions made to our nation by those who care for children and undertake other unpaid family work are seen as secondary, if they are seen at all, to the contributions made by those in paid employment. There is little incentive for greater numbers of men to take up unpaid family work while it remains undervalued.

Bahá'ís see progress in the area of attitudinal change as occurring in an evolutionary fashion, through the social and spiritual transformation of individuals and their relationships. The transformation required for true equality will undoubtedly be difficult for both men and women because both must re-evaluate what is familiar, what is routine. Change is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one's self and others, honest evaluation, loving education, and the passage of time.

***37. What are the best ways of engaging men in the work of caring (for children, elders or other family members) and other unpaid work?***

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.” It is the Bahá'í Community's view that firmly establishing the concept of partnership between men and women is an important means to achieve the equality of women and men. Such equality would be manifested in various ways including greater engagement of men in the work of caring and other unpaid work.

While the importance of partnership between men and women has been identified in international fora, we need to increase general understanding of, and commitment to, the concept of partnership. This should focus on partnership as an approach to gender equality as much as it does on partnership as the end result or manifestation of such equality. The engagement of men in the work of caring and other unpaid work would be an organic part of the development of partnership.

The role of men and boys in gender equality becomes a natural extension of the concept of partnership. At the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), 48<sup>th</sup> Session, 1-12 March 2004, the Australian Government itself stated that the role of men and boys in gender equality “is an important issue for Australia ...It is important that men be encouraged to be involved in tackling gender equality – not only as political leaders, employers, teachers, lawyers and journalists – but also as fathers, brothers, partners, carers, colleagues and peers. More work is needed through education and socialisation to tackle entrenched attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls and strategies need to be evaluated and best practices shared more widely”<sup>10</sup>.

We refer to the Agreed Conclusions on the Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality from the 48<sup>th</sup> Session of CSW.<sup>11</sup> While all the recommended actions would ultimately support societies in which greater balance between work and family was possible, we particularly draw attention to the following recommendations, which have the potential to increase men’s participation in caring and other unpaid work:

- c) Create and improve training and education programmes to enhance awareness and knowledge among men and women on their roles as parents, legal guardians and caregivers and the importance of sharing family responsibilities, and include fathers as well as mothers in programmes that teach infant child care development;
- f) Encourage the design and implementation of programmes at all levels to accelerate a socio-cultural change towards gender equality, especially through the upbringing and educational process, in terms of changing harmful traditional perceptions and attitudes of male and female roles in order to achieve the full and equal participation of women and men in the society;
- m) Adopt and implement legislation and/or policies to close the gap between women’s and men’s pay and promote reconciliation of occupational and family responsibilities, including through reduction of occupational segregation, introduction or expansion of parental leave, flexible working arrangements, such as voluntary part-time work, teleworking, and other home-based work;
- n) Encourage men, through training and education, to fully participate in the care and support of others, including older persons, persons with disabilities and sick persons, in particular children and other dependants.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://ofw.facs.gov.au/international/womens\\_human\\_rights/un\\_csw/csw\\_48\\_country\\_statement.htm](http://ofw.facs.gov.au/international/womens_human_rights/un_csw/csw_48_country_statement.htm)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw48/ac-men-auv.pdf>



***40. What responses to paid work and family conflict would assist to promote equality between men and women?***

Many Bahá'í families in Australia are striving to implement principles of consultation that create a tool for discussing openly, honestly and tactfully challenges that can arise within the family. Bahá'í consultation is well-suited to assisting either the couple or, where appropriate, the family as a whole, to resolve issues that can arise when families are striving to balance work and family responsibilities and through this tool, each family can achieve its own distinctive approach to such matters. We uphold the right and responsibility of the parents to reach decisions which impact on the whole family and also, depending on the nature of the issue, the rights of all members of the family to actively participate in the consultative process.

The goal of consultation is to allow the truth to be revealed in a way that will solve the problem to the benefit of all. In its simplest form it involves a five-step process:

1. Establish the full facts
2. Decide on the principles to be applied
3. Discuss the matter
4. Make a decision.
5. Actively support the decision and evaluate outcomes.

It is recognised, however, that in any group, no matter how constructive the consultation, there are nevertheless points on which, from time to time, agreement cannot be reached. In such instances involving a married couple, the Bahá'í Writings advise, “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”.

Our experience with developing consultative practices within Bahá'í families leads us to suggest that support to assist Australian families to develop consultative based models for family decision-making offers a means for maintaining family unity, fostering equality and allowing flexibility in meeting the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Also see responses to questions 3, 7, 36 and 37

***41. What are the possibilities for combining the lessons learnt by the women's and the men's movements to address inequitable paid and unpaid work arrangements?***

Both men's and women's organisations have valuable contributions to make in addressing the challenges of inequitable paid and unpaid work arrangements. We once again put forward the concept of partnership between men and women as a way of harnessing the contributions that they can make.

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”<sup>12</sup>

The Bahá’í Community suggests it is timely to establish a national expert or advisory group on gender equality, comprising men and women, to drive this process forward in Australia. Issues raised in *Striking the Balance* would be usefully addressed by such a group, enabling lessons from both the men’s and women’s movements to be shared and built upon.

***42. What do you think should be the key goals of paid and unpaid work arrangements in Australia?***

The goals of paid and unpaid work arrangements in Australia need to be viewed from a new perspective. In the Bahá’í view, the dichotomy between spirituality and materialism

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<sup>12</sup> *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 (OMEP), World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, Vienna, Austria, March 1993

is a key to understanding many of the challenges facing our society today. From this perspective, the current challenge of imbalance between family and work can be seen as partly symptomatic of an excessive materialism in Australian society and a self-centeredness that inhibits our ability to work together as a community. The desire to consume at ever-increasing levels, and indeed the seeking of meaning in possession of material goods, contributes to the creation of imbalances between work and family. Many families feel they have no choice but to devote more time and energy to the workplace in order to attain and maintain lifestyles that are seen as desirable if not essential in our society, but which – when seen by world standards – are exceedingly opulent. As stated by the Bahá'í International Community:

Central to the task of reconceptualizing the organization of human affairs is arriving at a proper understanding of the role of economics. The failure to place economics into the broader context of humanity's social and spiritual existence has led to a corrosive materialism in the world's more economically advantaged regions, and persistent conditions of deprivation among the masses of the world's peoples. Economics should serve people's needs; societies should not be expected to reformulate themselves to fit economic models. The ultimate function of economic systems should be to equip the peoples and institutions of the world with the means to achieve the real purpose of development: that is, the cultivation of the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness<sup>13</sup>.

The Bahá'í Community supports the view that work needs to be redefined at its core. Rather than just defining work as a generator of income, it should be accepted that we have to work in order to be fully human.<sup>14</sup> It is our view that each individual has the right to meaningful work and the responsibility to support his or her family and to contribute to the well-being of the community. By engaging in an occupation or craft in a spirit of service, the individual contributes something of value to society. For its part, society recognises the value of its members by creating opportunities for each to earn a livelihood and to make a contribution to the common good, thus assisting the individual's spiritual development. In this context, a goal of paid and unpaid work arrangements in Australia should be to support all members of society in developing their full potential and contributing to the greater good and advancement of civilisation.

As stated previously, a particular challenge is to make social and economic provisions for the full and equal participation of women in all aspects of life while simultaneously

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<sup>13</sup>Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development-A concept paper presented to the "World Faiths and Development Dialogue*, hosted by the President of the World Bank and the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace, London, England, 18-19 February 1998

<sup>14</sup>Don Edgar, *The War Over Work*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press (2005), p 8.

reinforcing the critical functions of motherhood. Paid and unpaid workplace arrangements should specifically address this challenge.

Also see the response to Question 20.

October 2005