



Australian Bahá'í Community

Submission to the Standing Committee on Family and Human Services Inquiry Into Balancing Work and Family

Introduction

In 1994, the International Year of the Family, the world paid increased attention to the pressures facing families and the impact of socio-economic changes in our society, which affected and altered the family in its function and as an institution. Concerns about balancing work and family responsibilities appear to have increased in the decade since and there is widespread anecdotal evidence of the challenges faced by families seeking to balance the competing demands of work and family. The prospect of this challenge is reportedly even influencing those contemplating parenthood.¹

The Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services is timely and the Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes this opportunity to have input to its deliberations. Bahá'í communities worldwide are striving to put into practice principles concerning the purpose of marriage and of family life, the relationship of members of the family to each other and to society at large and the equality of men and women. We believe these principles have relevance to the question of balancing work and family and share our views and experience in the hope that they will be of some assistance to the Standing Committee.

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 including 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.

¹ Ruth Weston, Lixia Qu, Robyn Parker and Michael Alexander Research, AIFS report no.11 2004, 'It's not for lack of wanting kids...' A report on the Fertility Decision Making Project. The report clearly suggests that most Australians in their primary childbearing years either have or want children but a core set of issues appeared to shape aspirations and expectations, including the perceived difficulties in having the time for both work and family life.

A New Perspective

In the Bahá'í view, the dichotomy between spirituality and materialism 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, creates 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 lifestyles that are seen as desirable if not essential in our society, but which – when seen by world standards – are exceedingly opulent.

The Bahá'í International Community has argued that such challenges need to be viewed from a new perspective:

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.

Society must develop new economic models shaped by insights that arise from a sympathetic understanding of shared experience, from viewing human beings in relation one to another, and from recognition of the central role that family and community play in social and spiritual well-being. Within institutions and organizations, priorities must be reassessed. Resources must be directed away from those agencies and programs that are damaging to the individual, societies and the environment, and directed toward those most germane to furthering a dynamic, just and thriving social order. Such economic systems will be strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature; they will provide meaningful employment and will help to eradicate poverty in the world.²

This is not to suggest that it is misguided to consider measures needed to assist families in balancing work and family responsibilities. The Bahá'í Community believes 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 recognizes the value of its members

² 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

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, balancing work and family responsibilities supports all members of the family in developing their full potential and contributing to the greater good.

Assisting Families to Respond to Challenges

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.

As the existence of this inquiry implies, a major pressure facing many families in Australia today is that of balancing work and family responsibilities. One response internationally has been to increasingly seek to “outsource” childcare, and in different parts of the world we have seen many notable experiments in relegating a major portion of the task of child rearing to agencies and individuals other than the parents. State-administered childcare agencies in the former USSR, Israel, and Eastern European countries, the phenomenal rise of public and private child-care facilities in North America and Western Europe, and some smaller but significant experiments in other parts of the world are examples of attempts to find alternatives to the family for many parenting tasks formerly assumed by parents and other relatives³.

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”⁴.

The Bahá'í Community believes that the family has always been and continues to be the most suitable place in which the next generation of children grow and form their views about themselves, the world, and the purpose and meaning of life. Provision of childcare will thus only ever be part of the solution to balancing work and family responsibilities and the Government's attention must also be directed to a range of measures, such as readjusting work schedules, job sharing, reducing the hours of work outside the home, extended maternity or paternity leaves, and the like, which assist parents to devote appropriate time and energy to rearing their children⁵. There also needs to be efforts to create greater recognition of the contribution made to society by families in rearing children. Such attitudinal change among employers, service

³ 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

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ 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 with their work.

providers and others will help to support families trying to balance work and family responsibilities.

The Bahá'í approach to the family combines elements of traditional wisdom with progressive principles and practical tools. We believe this approach offers a bulwark against the forces of disintegration and other pressures, as well as a framework for the creation of strong, healthy and unified families. The vision of the Bahá'í Faith is to create family environments in which all members flourish and 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.

The foundation and precondition for a Bahá'í family is the loving relationship of husband and wife. We suggest that increased measures to support couples in developing healthy marriages will provide a foundation for families to more effectively respond to the many challenges they face in juggling a raft of competing demands. By way of example, the "Marriage of Equals" participatory weekend workshop/retreat is offered by the Bahá'í community to singles, married couples, youth and adults. Some of the workshop's learning outcomes are:

- To identify the sacredness of marriage and the importance of preserving it
- Marriage as a process rather than an outcome
- The stages of a marriage
- Equality in marriage – men and women as "the wings of a bird" with equal powers and capacities
- The uniqueness of each marriage
- Some essential skills and virtues for well-functioning marriages
- The warning signs in a marriage
- Tests and challenges as a medium for learning and growth

Similarly, greater assistance to families in developing loving, respectful and harmonious relationships between parents and children can help families to withstand various pressures and respond creatively to opportunities and challenges. As an example, one project undertaken by the Bahá'í Community is the "Spiritual Parenting Program", which has the purpose of allowing an opportunity for parents to explore aspects of parenting related to spiritual values while identifying concerns and challenges related to parenting, and developing strategies and skills to overcome them.

Many Bahá'í families in Australia are striving to implement principles of consultation that create a tool for discussing openly, honestly and tactfully problems 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 to the Standing Committee that support to assist Australian families to develop consultative based models for family decision-making offers a means for maintaining family unity and allowing flexibility in meeting the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Equality as a Foundation for Balance

The equality of men and women is a vital and clearly stated spiritual and social principle of the Bahá'í Faith, 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 within the family, workplace and elsewhere, not only of women but also of men.

Traditionally the family has often sanctioned, defended and promoted the conditions of inequality between men and women, giving men a greater degree of freedom and privilege. "Male power" has been exercised in respect to all aspects of the female family members' lives – controlling their educational rights and privileges, their social opportunities and status, their economic well-being and independence, their personal freedoms and responsibilities, and their spiritual standing. Such families have been ill equipped to face the pressures of modern society.

In order to fully address the issues associated with balancing work and family responsibilities, we need to tackle the challenge of equality between women and men, particularly in the family and in the workplace. 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 Australian Bahá'í Community believes that both men and women have an inescapable duty to promote equality, in the family, in the workplace and in the community at large. At the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), 48th Session, 1-12 March 2004, the 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”⁶.

While acknowledging the Government’s support for initiatives such as the White Ribbon Campaign, in our view, the role of men and boys in gender equality requires far greater attention and action by Government and others.⁷ For its part, in 2002 the Bahá’í community established an agency, the Office for Equality, through which men are involved in promoting gender equality together with women. It has worked to develop, adapt and pilot programs to raise awareness of equality and build unity of vision among men and women. This has included the “Equal Wings” program aimed at providing men and women with the opportunity to understand the importance of practising the principle of equality and create in them a desire to adhere to this principle. Through the program, men learn to support the efforts of women to develop their full potential and to have access and control over time and resources, so that together they will contribute towards the advancement of the well-being of humankind.

We refer the Standing Committee to the Agreed Conclusions on the Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality from the 48th Session of CSW, in which Australia was a participant.⁸ 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:

- 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

⁶ http://ofw.facs.gov.au/international/womens_human_rights/un_csw/csw_48_country_statement.htm

⁷ The Bahá’í Community acknowledges the efforts of the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Ms Pru Goward, to encourage community discussion of various issues connected with work and family balance, including the role of men and boys.

⁸ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw48/ac-men-auv.pdf>

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.

Conclusion

Balancing work and family responsibilities is an increasing challenge for many Australian families. A wide range of assistance measures, not just focussed on the immediately identifiable issues around employment but also addressing the underlying causes of imbalance, are needed in order to help families to fully meet this challenge. We wish the members of the Standing Committee well as they consider this important subject and look forward to the outcomes of the inquiry.

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