



ADVANCING TOWARD THE EQUALITY OF WOMEN AND MEN

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Establishing the equality of women and men in society is a matter of vital importance to human advancement and one which has occupied the minds and driven the efforts of many people. Undoubtedly great advances have been made over the years in promoting this principle through the contributions of feminist thought and numerous individuals and groups acting in different social spaces around the world. Yet, despite these efforts to accord women full equality with men, numerous challenges still exist.

In this document the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity draws attention to a few of these challenges and examines them in the light of certain principles and aims that can potentially shape our responses to them. The thoughts offered here are a result of the endeavors of the Bahá'í community, since its inception, to put into practice the principle of the equality of women and men in its activities worldwide and the Institute's decade-long efforts to generate learning and gain insights about issues of global concern in collaboration with others.

The purpose of this working document is to invite dialogue and reflection on the challenges that face everyone who is actively contributing to the cause of the equality of women and men, as a means of advancing collective efforts toward the realization of this goal. The ideas conveyed here presume that the equality of men and women is a fundamental truth about human reality and not just a desired condition to be achieved for the good of society. The reality of the human being is his or her soul; and the soul, we firmly believe, has no gender. Men and women exhibit physical differences that undeniably influence some aspects of how they experience the world. Yet, in their essence, in their qualities and potentialities, in those aspects that make human beings human, men and women are without distinction. Neither can claim superiority over the other. "Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God."¹ It is therefore imperative that the equality that already exists as a spiritual truth be expressed in practice.

When viewed in its broader context, the discrimination against women in present day society is one of many symptoms of an ailing social order. We live in a world with rampant conflict and

1 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. II (Maryborough: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), no. 2145, p. 379.

injustice. Individuals and groups compete with one another in pursuit of narrow self-interests. Insecurity and violence are common place. For the most part, dominant social institutions, structures, and processes have not been set up in ways that effectively serve the common good and when people attempt to work within these systems to advance the common good they often face systemic constraints or outright political challenges. What is needed is a profound questioning of the assumptions underpinning the social systems and world views that enable and perpetuate these conditions. Otherwise the betterment of humankind and the advancement of civilization in both its spiritual and material dimensions will continue to elude humanity's best efforts. Our aim cannot be only to open room for women to participate in the affairs of society within the present social order. Rather, women and men must work shoulder to shoulder as they apply spiritual principles to the construction of a new social order characterized by justice, peace and collective prosperity.

Building social institutions and developing social practices that advance the equality of women and men, and promote the principles of unity and justice, will demand profound changes in the minds and hearts of people and in the structures of society. Individuals and groups working towards this goal may wish to consult and reflect on some of the questions and challenges that arise as they strive to apply these principles to different aspects of their individual and collective lives. The following statements attempt to identify some of these challenges and questions.

1. Expanding the basis of human identity

Individual and collective identity—our sense of who we are and how we fit into the world—is an important aspect of our socialization as human beings. It is closely tied to our sense of purpose and how we perceive our relationships with others. In the process of building civilizations, a significant factor has been the demonstrated capacity of human beings to compose identities which go beyond real or imagined difference. Yet those who have sought advantage at the expense of others have often invoked real or imagined differences as a means of dividing people—in order to advance their own interests and ambitions. Over time, these distinctions born of self-interest have solidified into stereotyped constructs related to race, gender, nationality and ethnicity. These stereotyped constructs have often been used to define human beings and to divide them into groups. Narrowly identifying with particular physical or social characteristics and placing them at the center of our understanding of self and other has had ruinous consequences, whether that identity has been used as a basis for seeking preference over others or has congealed in response to the experience of prejudice and oppression. The deeply fragmented social reality that we find around us today is, in part, a consequence of these narrow identity constructs and attachments.

Beyond these fragmented ways that individuals and groups have come to define themselves, men and women of insight, often inspired by the sacred scriptures of the world, have throughout history sought to broaden human consciousness by drawing attention to that which is most essential about human nature: the inner reality with which every human being is born, the reflection of the Divine in each of us, that which we all share in common, that which is whole within us, as opposed to the fragmented labels with which society tags us in the course of our life. This primary, over-arching human identity, rooted in the reality of the human soul which has no gender, race, nationality or other physical or social distinction, can be understood and developed in a manner that simultaneously values the many secondary aspects of human diversity. Through the unshake-

able sense of security that comes from being consciously aware of one's underlying spiritual nature, shared by all humanity, it becomes possible for an individual to derive joy from, and to value, all the other aspects of one's identity. This can be done in a spirit of openness—a willingness to share with and to learn from others. This broadened sense of our common humanity is expressed in the following passage from the Bahá'í Writings: “Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul.”²

At the collective level, this shared identity, which is spiritual in nature, serves as the basis for regarding humanity as one. Not only does it override differences that arise on account of birth or upbringing, but it also inspires action by uniting people and leading them to cooperate, to form relationships and build communities. It is only in this way that human beings can fulfill their dual purpose which is to develop their individual potentialities and to contribute to the advancement of society. The principle of the oneness of humankind is an expression of our underlying reality.

The analogy of the human body illustrates how the principle of oneness can govern social organization. Within the body, millions of cells, with an extraordinary diversity of forms and functions, collaborate to make the existence of the human being possible. They give and receive whatever is needed for their individual function as well as for the growth and welfare of the whole. No one would try to explain the life of a healthy body in terms of concepts used so freely to describe society nowadays, such as the concept of self-interested competition for scarce resources. Nor would one argue that in order for the body to function better, all of its cells should become identical; such uniformity would make the body incapable of carrying out any of the complex functions necessary for its existence. The principle that governs the functioning of the human body is unity in diversity. It is possible to conceive of human society in a similar way. Society is composed of myriads of individuals and groups who have various affiliations and secondary identities but who also have a primary identity, rooted in the spiritual nature that they share with the rest of humanity. This identity that reflects the reality of all human beings forms the basis of their collective efforts to advance the common good.

There are undeniably groups of people in the world today, women most certainly among them, who experience oppression and whose positive sense of identity is being undermined. The identities of such groups who have been oppressed need to be recognized and affirmed. Yet, a mature humanity must needs go further and recognize the broader identity shared by all in order to overcome the injustices facing so many. How, then, do we ensure that raising consciousness and addressing the conditions of injustice that affect a particular group do not result in a narrowing of identity and in the reinforcement of divisive distinctions? How do we foster the will to struggle for change without making these identity issues our sole cause? How do we prevent identity-based struggles from becoming ends in themselves, rather than working towards a society which embodies the principle of the oneness of humanity and is free from the many forms of prejudice and discrimination that afflict the world? How do we assure that emphasizing a common identity premised on the spiritual nature of the human being, and the principle of oneness that derives from it, does not reinforce passive habits of acceptance and resignation but rather strengthens the will to champion justice? How do we recognize difference without glorifying it, obscuring

2 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, Arabic no. 68, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), p. 20

commonalities or creating divisions between people? How do we assure that under the banner of unity we are not promoting uniformity but are, instead, seeking to create environments of unity that value diversity? How do we help people develop their primary identity by taking into consideration their spiritual reality and their connection with others?

2. Overcoming oppression through the acquisition of self-knowledge

Thirst for knowledge is one of the greatest forces that can shape one's purpose, and understanding is one of the most precious gifts a human being can possess. Among the greatest forms of oppression is that a person desiring knowledge and seeking the truth should not know where to find it and from what source to seek it. To know who we are and the purpose for which we have been created is one of the most profound yearnings of the human soul. And yet, this self-knowledge is denied to so many by the oppressive forces at play in all societies. Around the world, women and men are taught false conceptions about who they are, what their true nature is, and what conduces to their happiness and fulfillment. Their inherent nobility and potential is denied. Violence against women and girls, carried out every day, often in the most brutal forms, poses an immediate threat to millions and perpetuates in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations. Resolving this pressing challenge is not just a question of changing attitudes but also structures—structures which exist at the level of laws, regulations and policies but which are also social, cultural and mental.

Even in societies where women have been granted certain political and economic rights and are legally empowered, both men and women are denied knowledge of their true selves. Women are objectified and sexuality is made the core of their identity. Their aims and aspirations are set in terms of pleasing men. Attraction to beauty, another force seeded in the human soul that can potentially shape one's moral purpose and direct one toward standards of excellence and refinement, is deliberately perverted to the point where women and men are seen as no more than means for the gratification of material desires. Rather than counteracting such views, existing educational programs often serve to reinforce them by emphasizing intellectual development without due consideration of moral values and spiritual qualities—values that enable individuals to move beyond a preoccupation with the pursuit of personal wealth and satisfaction, toward action for the benefit of the whole. Other potent agents of socialization today are systems of mass media, including emerging forms of new media. Around the world, adolescent girls and boys are raised in an environment that is strongly influenced by media systems that propagate and exploit misconceptions about human nature. Acting on the dictates of certain industries and interests, media systems are frequently used as instruments of manipulation. Media systems also work to naturalize the messages and habits of thought they propagate, until these messages and habits begin to appear as normal, inevitable features of social life.

From where can people seek knowledge about the true nature and potential of the human being? How can social values and structures premised on false conceptions of human nature be critically examined and reformed? How can education be used as a means for nurturing thirst for knowledge and attraction to beauty to the benefit of society and the upliftment of human conduct? Who will be the protagonists of such changes? And how can this process be approached in ways that are constructive and unifying? How can individuals and groups begin to counteract the nega-

tive influences of media? What role can media play in fostering positive social change? How can new media content be developed that reflects the true nature of human beings?

3. Moving beyond cultural relativism

The diverse cultures that exist in the world today embody different ways of perceiving and interacting with the world. Humanity is gradually maturing beyond the notion that some ‘advanced’ and ‘civilized’ cultures carry the burden of ‘civilizing’ others. Most thoughtful people agree that cultural imperialism, or the domination of one culture by another, can no longer be condoned or enabled. Along with a growing appreciation for local knowledge, people everywhere are gaining greater understanding of the strength and richness that comes from cultural diversity, much like the genetic diversity that we treasure in the natural world and view as a common trust.

There are, however, certain beliefs or practices in every culture that are prejudicial towards, or are in some way harmful to, particular groups, especially women and girls who often occupy the most vulnerable positions in society. Cultural relativism, the view that all cultural practices and beliefs are equally valid, has gained prominence in recent times and has certain value. But when cultural relativism is elevated as the sole lens through which we view cultures, it provides no means of overcoming oppressive aspects of cultures, no means of addressing the injustices that are frequently carried out in the name of tradition, culture, and often religion, and no means of creating more just and equitable societies. Taken to the extreme, cultural relativism denies the possibility of any universal moral standards. It can also be used as an excuse for inaction to prevent injustice or, more seriously, as a defense for action that is objectively harmful to certain groups. This kind of approach has in many circumstances led to a moral void, and a paralysis of will, that has allowed for the perpetuation of injustices.

If all values and norms are deemed relative to their cultural context, what should be done about practices that, for example, threaten the life and health of women and girls in different societies? Are there any universal values or norms? If so, who sets them? In this regard, many people believe that just as there are physical laws which apply to all human beings, there are spiritual principles that are neither inventions of the human mind nor social conventions. Rather, they are expressions of the laws of material and spiritual existence and are built into the structure of the universe. How can we all be assisted to recognize these universal spiritual principles? How does a community determine how such principles should be applied? Who is to decide what changes are to be made and how? Where does moral authority come from? How do people become empowered to reflect on their own cultural values and determine what changes should be made? What systems and structures support these changes?

4. Transforming economic structures and processes

Through work, human beings develop their capacities to think, to create, to provide and care for others and to contribute to the advancement of civilization. But work cannot yield productive results for families, communities, and societies when half of the world’s population controls only 1% of its wealth, and 10% of the population controls 85% of the wealth.³ We live in a world

³ *The World Distribution of Household Wealth*, James B. Davies, Susanna Sandström, Anthony Shorrocks, and Edward N. Wolff (United Nations University–World Institute for Development Economics Research, December 2006).

in which work does not yield viable subsistence for the majority and does not contribute to happiness for many others. Productive and meaningful work is not reliably available to large segments of humanity. This social reality demonstrates a fundamental crisis in the current economic system and in the assumptions and principles that underlie it. New economic thinking and new economic relationships are needed in order to overcome the current highly unstable combination of stagnation in some regions and hyperactivity in others. The way we define and arrange our economy expresses what we value and is intimately related to advancing the equality of women and men. With this in mind, we can ask ourselves what kind of economic productivity emerges from competition and conflict, and what comes from cooperation and reciprocity? Are there other sources of human motivation and economic vitality other than self-interest and competition that an economy can tap into?

Economic activity and the strengthening of the economy—a process that may include, but is not synonymous with, economic growth—have a crucial role to play in achieving the material and spiritual prosperity of a region and its people. Humanity’s growing appreciation of the economic interdependence among different regions of the world and the possibilities for global integration are also of great value. However, the narrowly materialistic worldview underpinning much of modern economics has contributed to the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of important institutions, and the exploitation and marginalization of large segments of the population—women and girls key amongst them. Moreover, when we consider the spiritual dimensions of existence, and we acknowledge the spiritual potential that is latent within all human beings, it is clear that the assumptions underlying today’s dominant economic systems do not draw out these latent potentials—such as our capacity to love, to build unity and to serve others. Furthermore, these dominant systems are set up in such a way that in many cases they severely disadvantage those whose economic behavior is consistent with spiritual and moral principles. Finally, the fact that increased flows of goods, services, capital and labor within existing structures and processes benefit only a very few at the expense of so many—giving rise to the impoverishment of entire local communities, the exploitation of vulnerable populations, and the mass destruction of the environment—can clearly not be ignored.

Economic pressures such as these have, among other things, resulted in the disruption and dislocation of families and communities and the disappearance of diversified, ecologically sustainable small-scale agriculture, mostly in rural areas where it is often women who carry out the bulk of the work and who are disproportionately affected by these trends. Such pressures have also led to growing insecurity within local economies that have historically valued social ties and a collective sense of well-being over competition and individual advancement. To make these statements is not to romanticize the past or to promote a naïve ideal of the ‘local’ in reaction to the idea of a distant, all-powerful ‘global’. Rather, it is to recognize that diverse economic arrangements need to be explored and given space to develop. Collective human prosperity will not be achieved merely by integrating more and more people into the dominant economic order as it currently exists. This insight is directly relevant to the struggle for the advancement of women, who have been structurally marginalized within this order.

It is widely recognized that the economic empowerment of women is an essential aspect of the advancement of the equality of women and men and necessary for assuring that women have options and the ability to make decisions conducive to their own well-being and that of their

families. In light of the observations made above, those who wish to foster women's full and equal participation in society will also need to reflect on the nature of the economic arrangements within which this participation is to take place. We need to ask ourselves whether such arrangements should only be concerned with the accumulation of material wealth that enriches a few or whether they should aim to enhance collective prosperity and promote community well-being and environmental sustainability. If our goal is the latter, then we need to ask ourselves how can a recognition of the unremunerated and unacknowledged work of feeding, nurturing and caring for others refine our understanding of economic realities? In addition, while rendering such work visible and valuable, how can we ensure that women participate more fully in all fields of work, that men become more active in the work of caring and nurturing and that the values underpinning such work are carried to other arenas of society? How can people translate recognition of interdependence into the creation of strong local economies? How can women and men engage in economic activity in a way that conduces to justice? How can they contribute to the construction of new economic structures and processes that reflect values such as reciprocity, cooperation, and mutual aid rather than competition and exploitation? How can we expand the conception of human rationality so that it is not reduced to utility maximization on the part of self-interested individuals who are divorced from social and moral obligations? How can we reconceptualize the nature and purpose of work, wealth and economic empowerment in light of the two-fold purpose of life: to develop individually and to contribute to the betterment of society?

5. Redefining power

True equality between men and women will not be established unless prevailing conceptions of power that dominate contemporary thought are seriously questioned and fundamentally redefined. Understood in its broadest sense, power has to do with capacity. The exercise of power, or capacity, is fundamental to social existence and essential for transforming reality and advancing civilization. In other words, nothing can be accomplished in this world without the use of power. However, current conceptions of power tend to focus on the capacity to pursue one's self-interests, to compete effectively, to get others to act according to one's will, to dominate, to manipulate and to prevail over or against others. Moreover, it is often in terms of its most tangible physical, political, social and economic sources that people commonly think about power.

Understood and enacted in these terms, abuses of power and the unequal distribution of material sources and instruments of power have resulted in innumerable hardships and great suffering for women historically and into the present day. Many thoughtful people, feminist scholars and activists among them, have thus critiqued these prevailing conceptions of power and recognized that in an interdependent social body, coercive and adversarial expressions of power retard the progress and development of all members of the social body. They have instead drawn attention to the many integrative and mutualistic expressions of power that have clearly played an indispensable role in promoting social progress and well-being throughout history.

A reconceptualization of power in this sense requires a broadened appreciation of the sources of power available to humanity, which include the limitless and generative powers of unity, love, justice and equity, knowledge, humility, integrity and truthfulness—powers humanity has been learning to draw upon over the centuries. Expressions of power emanating from these sources can be seen in the capacity to work creatively and constructively with others in the pursuit of common

goals, the capacity to cooperate, and the capacity to transform social reality to reflect spiritual truths such as the equality of women and men. As we move beyond the material struggle to exercise power over or against others, and we develop the capacity to draw on these other sources of power accessible to every human being, we activate greater forms of individual and collective agency and create new possibilities for the well-being of women and men.

As expressed in the introduction to this document, advancing the equality of women and men cannot be conceived only in terms of bringing women into the various arenas of the current social order. It must involve women and men striving together to build a new social order. In this context, how can we reframe the concept of power and transform its expression in human affairs? How can we draw upon other sources of power in order to establish the equality of women and men and promote prosperity and collective well-being? What would empowerment mean in this context? How can we ensure that the means and methods by which we advance the equality of women and men, and by which we strive for the betterment of the world, embody and reinforce unifying, mutualistic, and cooperative expressions of power? How can diverse groups who are working for these common goals collaborate, rather than compete, in their efforts? And how can mutual empowerment become a distinguishing characteristic of all human relations?

This document has highlighted just a few among the most salient challenges to be addressed in the effort to advance toward the equality of women and men. While there are, of course, many other challenges, it is hoped that consultations around the issues raised here can, in some small way, enrich the discourse on the equality of women and men and help in further linking it to the broader aim of constructing a new society governed by the principles of unity and justice.

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The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) is a non-profit organization, dedicated to building capacity in individuals, groups and institutions to contribute to prevalent discourses concerned with the betterment of society.

Drawing on both science and religion as two complementary systems of knowledge and practice, learning environments are created where knowledge and experience can be shared and systematized. Principles, concepts and approaches that are relevant to the advancement of civilization are explored through a process of study, reflection and consultation.

Founded in 1999 - and working in collaboration with the Bahá'í International Community - the Institute also engages in learning about the methods, approaches and instruments which can best be employed to contribute to the discourses of society.

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