

Women and Development: Embracing Opportunities for Change

A roundtable meeting organized by the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development in collaboration with Barli Development Institute for Rural Women

Concept Note

The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development in collaboration with Barli Development Institute for Rural Women is organizing a roundtable meeting on the theme 'Women and Development: Embracing Opportunities for Change'. This is part of the Bahá'í Chair's series of roundtable meetings titled 'Dialogues on Development'.

One of the fundamental aims of development plans and policies over the past many decades has been the establishment of social justice by promoting the advancement of those who face discrimination on account of caste, religion, gender or ethnicity. Among the oldest and most widespread forms of discrimination has been the oppression of women and the denial of equal rights and opportunities to them. Through enlightened legislation and the efforts of numerous thinkers, activists and reformists for well over a century, great progress has been achieved in advancing towards the equality of women and men. Yet, none would deny that a great distance remains to be covered in reaching this goal. There are numerous cultural norms that stand in the way of a women's progress. While in some contexts women are denied equal access to education or meaningful work and their participation in public life is undermined or limited, in other contexts women are objectified, sexuality is made the core of their identity, and their aims and aspirations are set in terms of pleasing men.

The tremendous motivation and will needed to uproot injustice against women in society can only be summoned when equality is accepted as a spiritual principle. The equality between women and men derives from the fact that the reality of the human being is his or her soul and the soul has no gender. In that which is most essential to human identity, in those noble qualities and capacities that distinguish humans from animals, men and women are alike. Neither man nor woman can claim superiority over the other. This equality that already exists at the spiritual realm has to be also expressed in the social world. This will require empowering women through education and the provision of opportunities for participation and progress in all areas of human endeavor. It will also require conscious effort to transform cultural patterns of thought and behavior that favor men. Such harmful patterns place limits on the possibilities for change by making the oppression of women seem a normal aspect of culture. Unless such patterns are recognized and dismantled, equality will remain an empty slogan or a mere rhetorical statement. The long path of conscious learning that society needs to traverse in order to embody this principle in ever higher degrees will sadly remain thwarted.

Along with prejudicial patterns of thought and behavior, there is a need for transforming institutions and structures of society where male preference is embedded, exerted and perpetuated in open or subtle ways - from the intimate setting of the family, to the spaces of the community and the work place. The transformation being sought is one where the noblest human qualities will find expression in all aspects of social existence. These include those qualities and capacities that women have developed to a greater degree as part of their roles in care-giving and

nurturing such as love, service, tender-heartedness, mercy, sympathy and cooperation. In building such a society, men and women will work together shoulder to shoulder, as collaborators in the building of a better society.

In the recent past, there have been many encouraging signs that public opinion and political will in India have been roused to take concrete steps for ending the mistreatment of women. The thousands who take to the streets in protest throughout the country every time a case of violence against women is reported give voice to a deep-seated yearning for change. The demand for justice which wells out of the hearts and minds of modern India can be ignored or repressed for a while; but it cannot be denied. There is every reason for hope that with vision, conviction and an attitude of learning, this positive energy can be channelized into a mighty step forward in the path towards equality of the sexes.

Given below are a few questions to stimulate discussion during this roundtable:

- In the efforts towards advancing the equality of women and men, there is a balance to be achieved between the spiritual principles of unity and justice. How does one ensure that in emphasizing the principle of the oneness of humankind and the need for being united, we do not reinforce passive habits of acceptance and resignation but rather strengthens the will to champion justice?
- The family is one of the first and most powerful spaces where gender roles are learned and perpetuated in both overt and subtle ways. How can boys and girls be brought up from an early age with qualities and capacities that will help them, as they grow up, to become proactive promoters of equality between the sexes? How can men be assisted to take on an equal share of responsibilities in parenting of children and care-giving for the old? How can decision making in the family be organized on a consultative and collective basis rather than being dictated by the head of the family?
- Another space where there have been both advancements and setbacks in implementing the principle of equality has been the workplace. Although women have entered every field of work in large numbers, the continuing influence of patriarchy still ensures that a woman's contributions can be easily undermined or ignored simply by virtue of her being woman. In many fields, women still receive less pay than their colleagues and men are preferred over them when it comes to promotions or challenging assignments. How can men be sensitized to the many obstacles that women face in the workplace and how can they collaborate together in seeking to remove these barriers to the progress of women?
- In what ways can educational systems create consciousness in new generations to recognize the prevalence of patriarchal prejudices in open and subtle ways? How can spiritual and moral education programs instill a deep commitment to equality of the sexes and foster the will to become champions of justice by pushing against the status quo even when it demands sacrifice?
- The media, advertising, film and literature are perhaps the most powerful means for socializing young people in conceptions of masculinity and femininity. How can the considerable influence of these institutions on public perceptions be leveraged to model and propagate positive and mature conceptions of femininity and masculinity?