



## **Building a More Caring World: Implications for the Family**

### *Background Note*

In order to stimulate reflection and dialogue on the vital importance of building a more caring society, the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore is organizing a series of webinars on the theme 'Building a More Caring World: Implications for the Family, the Community and the Market' (A discussion paper on this overall theme can be accessed [here](#)). The first webinars in this series will explore the implications of this theme for the family.

Despite its crucial role in sustaining life and developing human capabilities, the true value of care often remains unrecognized. This systemic devaluation of care is closely related to the history of patriarchy. Care work has been devalued due to its association with the household which is considered part of the feminine private domain as opposed to the masculine public domain where work is recognized and valued. Due to care's association with women, even when care work is remunerated or carried out professionally, it is generally lower paid and less prestigious.

In most societies around the world, a woman's gender role has included the obligation to attend to the needs of the members of the family, especially children, the elderly, and the sick, and to manage and carry out various household chores. Women are expected to accept care responsibilities without compensation or acknowledgment since it is viewed as a God-given or nature-ordained duty. Failure to perform such services could invite the penalty of severe censure or even domestic violence.

While a patriarchal order values achievement, autonomy, and independence in men, self-abnegation, devotion to the family, and sacrifice are expected of women. Women are often expected to assume almost the entire responsibility for care labour at home which comes at the cost of limiting their freedom to choose their life path and missing opportunities to develop their capabilities. Further, the very nature of care work tends to make the caregiver emotionally attached to the person being cared for. This condition makes the caregiver (who is mostly a woman) into what Nancy Folbre calls a "prisoner of love" since she will not be willing to bargain for greater freedom for herself if such freedom imperils the well-being of the one being cared for (Folbre, 2002, p.38). The injustice of being made almost entirely responsible for caring labour inhibits millions of women from pursuing their higher education or participating fully in the work force as equals with men. This is often the case even in countries that have achieved high levels of economic development.

The revaluation of the conception of care thus cannot be achieved without decoupling it from patriarchal gender norms. Such efforts would naturally have to begin with the family, the primary space where both caring needs are addressed and conceptions of masculinity and femininity are formed, acted out and enforced.

Efforts aimed at correcting the discrimination against women in the family usually focus on removing barriers to their full participation in all arenas of life, sensitizing boys and men on the importance of care and equipping them with the skills needed to share equally in all its joys and burdens. The effectiveness of such efforts depends, in part, on a profound consciousness of the many implications of the principle of the equality of women and men. Appreciating this principle of equality becomes possible when a distinction is drawn between gender which is socially constructed and the inner nature of the human being which consists of those qualities and propensities that are common to all irrespective of sex. While the physical differences between men and women undeniably influences how they experience the world, the soul of the human being – that which is essential to our humanity - has no gender (Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, 2009, p. 1). Given that the propensity to be caring and nurturing is common to all human beings as part of this shared nature, boys and men can, with the right orientation and guidance, develop and demonstrate the capacities for serving others in all settings.

Transforming gender norms would entail critically analyzing existing notions of masculinity and femininity and the assumptions underlying them against this non-fragmented conception of a fundamental human identity that transcends gender. For example, some prevalent conceptions of masculinity unduly glorify the values of autonomy, independence, self-reliance, toughness, and individual resilience. While these qualities have their value in particular contexts, their being feted in popular culture as uniquely masculine qualities leads to young boys learning from an early age to regard being vulnerable or dependent on others as signs of weakness that are to be rejected. Indeed, rather than helping young boys develop qualities in accordance with their natural state of interdependence by learning to collaborate and draw on each other's strengths, they are taught to compete and prove their worth on their own. Dependence on others is projected as a pathological sign of dysfunction. Similarly, rather than help men develop a healthy sense of their vulnerability, they are taught to be ashamed of their vulnerabilities or frailties and to portray an invulnerable persona as the mark of their manhood. The burden of living up to these unrealistic and ultimately inhumane standards undermines the emotional and psychological health of men. It impairs their capacities to develop healthy social relationships based on trust, mutuality, and cooperation.

On the other hand, from a young age girls internalize the norms, values, standards of behaviour, ways of thinking and social expectations that are set for them by a patriarchal order. Often their subordination to the will and needs of others can go to such an extent that women are “denied a cultural conception of themselves as individuals” and they “may not even think of themselves as separate persons” (Folbre, 2002, p.6). Both the self-abnegation of the one and the self-aggrandizement of the other are two ends of the same spectrum. They are products of a social order shaped not by a conception of our common humanity but rather by the self-interested motives of patriarchy.

Given that these gender norms are embedded in the structures of society, transforming them is a complex process that takes time. To be sure, groups, organizations, and individuals working over many decades have already achieved significant progress in establishing the equality of women and men as an incontestable normative principle. Yet, much remains to be achieved in translating this principle into action. The surest foundation for replacing oppressive gender norms with egalitarian and just conceptions lies in the concepts and practices that young minds learn from their earliest years in the family. In this regard, by sharing equally in domestic care work, not only are boys learning to be fair and unselfish and girls learning that they are socially equal to boys, the practice of care by its very nature will call forth and develop the nurturing and caring capabilities within them.

Caring for another human being requires capability and discipline as much as the qualities of love and compassion. Rather than being temporarily moved by altruistic sentiments, it calls for consistency, commitment, and trustworthiness in the caregiver. The caregiver is often required to place the care-receivers' needs above their own. These capabilities are built through practice over a long period of time, and the intimate space of the family is the most natural setting where this learning process can begin for both boys and girls.

The challenge before the present and future generations is not just to create families where the equality of the sexes is a lived reality but also to build a society where care is highly valued for its seminal role in providing the conditions for the full development of human potential. While care is a means to progress, being caring in the sense of manifesting the qualities and abilities needed to actively support the progress of another person or be a responsible steward of the natural world, is in itself the mark of a morally and socially well-developed person. Thus, in the context of the family, the challenge is not only to ensure that all participate in carrying out domestic responsibilities, but also to raise young boys and girls who aspire to build their capabilities to serve and care for other human beings and the planet.

The above considerations raise several questions. How can a family identify and change pre-existing norms and habits that, in one way or another, devalue care or assign it as solely a women's concern? How can generations of young people be raised with the yearning to serve others, to be champions of justice and builders of unity and not just achievers of professional attainment or economic success? Parents clearly play a signal role in this process. Yet, for their efforts to bear enduring results, they will need the support of the extended family, the State and various institutions of society such as the education system and the media. What is called for is a society-wide reorientation and realignment of values from those based on materialism towards commitment to principles that express the higher potential in human beings. How is such a transformation to take place? How can faith in the possibility of such a transformation be kindled and sustained? Faith in the possibility of change depends in part on how compellingly that change can be imagined or conceived. Imagining an alternative world where the values of care are preeminent will call for new metaphors, vocabularies and new uses of language that can allow us to go beyond the limiting premises of our prevalent culture and open a space for looking at familiar concepts in new ways. The very concept of care and the associated notions of love, collaboration, reciprocity and service, will need to be reconceived to discard the negative or limited connotations attached to them by a patriarchal and individualistic culture and to envision the vast potentialities for individual and social progress inherent to new and more broadened ways of understanding and applying these concepts. How is such an imaginative intervention in the life of society to be initiated?

For a vast number of economically underprivileged families where both parents often have to work to make ends meet, the needs for external assistance with care are immediate and constant. How can these needs be better recognized and prioritized by the State and CSOs? Where the support from the State is inadequate, how can capacity be built at the level of a group of neighboring families or a community to support each other with their caring needs? In all such efforts, the challenge will be to ensure that the conception of care is not reduced merely to its material dimensions as the delivery of a set of services, essential as they are. If the values of care are to be the guiding vision for society, they will have to address all dimensions of human well-being, including the spiritual, the emotional, the social, and the material. Caring for the non-material dimensions of life includes creating structures and environments conducive to social and spiritual development and synergizing such development with material progress in a mutually reinforcing way. How is the learning associated with these dimensions of caring to be generated, and in what ways can it begin from the family?

## References

Folbre, N. (2002). *The invisible heart: Economics and family values*. The New Press.

Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. (2009). *Advancing toward the equality of women and men*.  
[https://www.globalprosperity.org/media/documents/ISGP\\_Advancing\\_Toward\\_the\\_Equality\\_of\\_Women\\_and\\_Men.pdf](https://www.globalprosperity.org/media/documents/ISGP_Advancing_Toward_the_Equality_of_Women_and_Men.pdf)