

THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND MEN IN BUILDING A BETTER SOCIETY

*This statement is issued by the **Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Londonderry / Tionól Spioradalta Bhahá'ithe Dhoire** the elected administrative and representative body for the Bahá'í Faith in the city of Derry-Londonderry.*

Political leaders bear an unenviable burden. They must provide for the well-being of their people, preferring these over themselves, rejecting outdated models that emphasize self and promote imbalances of power. They must ask, and crucially begin answering, the right questions. For instance: What are the elements of our economic system that make it deeply dysfunctional? Why women are largely excluded from meaningful decision-making when their participation benefits everyone? How can we stem the tide of inequality threatening the stability of societies and nations? How can we invest in the well-being of rising generations, giving them every opportunity to walk a path far more meaningful and far less treacherous than the one we have tread?

It may seem strange to raise the question of gender balance in positions of power when so many party leaders are women, but their presence does not yet indicate a radical shift in attitudes towards women. A classic example of this is the way they are often judged on things like aspects of their appearance which does not happen to men in similar positions.

We believe that women and men are equal, and always have been. This is a spiritual truth whose expression in the world has been overlooked or suppressed throughout most of history, owing in part to systems and structures that have long favoured men's progress and participation over women's. While the equality of women and men is being increasingly acknowledged, this does not automatically eliminate the obstacles to the working out of the principle in every dimension of life. Acknowledging a problem is the first step to changing it, but it is only the first step.

Significant advances have been made in terms of educational access and the creation of environments for women to thrive alongside men; but far more needs to be accomplished. While in many parts of the world structural injustice continues to suppress women's potential, here the problem is often deeper and harder to address as it reflects long-held attitudes. Until these inequalities and perceptions are thoroughly uprooted from the fabric of society, there will remain obstacles not just to the full empowerment of half of the community, but to the development of a society that will benefit all of it.

The civilisation to which thoughtful people aspire is one where the material and spiritual (intangible) dimensions of life are in harmony, and the material aspects of civilisation, such as commerce and governance, involve spiritual principles, such as equity and justice. But the way things are normally done now are more likely to involve conflict and aggression. While humans are capable of violence, selfishness, cowardice, and competition, they are also able to be kind, to prefer others over themselves, to carry out acts of courage, to put others before themselves, and to cooperate even when competition is the norm. Those who govern us should be seeking ways of cultivating the higher nature of their citizens, focusing vigorous learning processes around how these better qualities can be developed and released. What is more, the dynamics that have come to define relationships of power must be reimagined in the light of a genuine understanding of the oneness of humanity in order for all people to have an opportunity to lead meaningful lives.

Since women are the first educators of rising generations, their educational opportunity should be given emphasis in all communities. The qualities that women can bring to the workforce, indeed to every sphere of life, have long been undervalued and humanity has suffered as a result. Can we foresee the fruits of true partnerships between men and women in all areas of life? Humanity can be likened to a bird with two wings, the male and the female, that has struggled to take flight because the female wing has been kept weak for so long. Who can fully envision the great heights to which humanity will soar when both wings are strong and coordinated?

The period of youth is one of immense significance in the life of any human being and one where education – in the widest sense, not merely formal and grades-related – has a vital and undervalued part to play in the shaping of future society. Such education can be the difference between a young man who respects his female counterparts and one who demeans them or worse. Education around such attitudes unfolds at home, in schools, in communities, and in the many social environments where life plays out.

The discipline that governs our relationships with the world is largely formed within the family. The tendencies to be unjust or just, to act violently or with kindness, to be dishonest or trustworthy, are usually developed at home. These habits are then taken into every instance of social interaction, becoming either obstacles or stepping stones to progress, tearing apart or weaving together the very fabric of society. If brothers are allowed to dominate their sisters, for instance, a habit is formed that will be carried from the living room to the classroom, the workplace and finally, the international arena. Conversely, when daughters are included in decision-making processes, when sons are encouraged to care for the household, characters are being developed. Children learn that the intellectual powers of both boys and girls are vital, that the nurturing qualities generally associated with women are equally praiseworthy when shown by men.

This social education needs to be included at the appropriate stages of our educational programmes. Young people are beginning to understand their role in society, in all dimensions of life, including the economic life of their communities. If the rising generations are not merely to labour within an ailing system, but are to gradually contribute to the creation of a flourishing one, key capabilities must be cultivated early.

Their education – and here we are not simply talking about formal education, schooling - must be comprehensive, addressing their developing spiritual, physical, and intellectual powers. A key principle that must be taught from an early age is the oneness of humankind. Within this, the equality of women and men should be emphasized. Young people see the contradictions in the world. Words and concepts alone cannot erase the often harmful messaging assailing them from all quarters. Hence there is a need for social-based activities also – activities that are now all too often squeezed out of school by the need to focus activities on those leading to good grades and league-table positions.

While these points may seem at first to be a plea addressed to educational authorities, we feel they have much wider implications. The development – and the application in all spheres of life - of measures of this sort will have a lasting and positive effect on our society and help it towards becoming a shared one in the widest sense.

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