

Toward a New Discourse on Religion and Gender Equality

Baha'i International Community's Statement to the 59th Commission on the Status of Women and on the 20th Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women

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As Member States gather to review the progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and to address gender equality in the post-2015 development agenda, the time has come for a serious conversation about the role of religion in advancing the equality of women and men. Religion as a basis for social and political mobilization is a reality that must be openly examined. The continuing importance of religion in people's lives and identities can no longer be ignored. If it is to play a constructive role in society, the very concept of religion, as well as its nature and purpose needs to be reexamined. We must be ready to discard labels that have locked us in adversarial debates such as "secular vs. religious," "modern vs. traditional," "liberal vs. conservative," "Western vs. non-Western." The role of religion in human life and the equality of women and men are realities too complex to be reduced to such comparisons. A new discourse is needed—one suited to the needs of the age in which we live. The Baha'i International Community wishes to stimulate and to contribute to such a discourse.

At the outset, we wish to state clearly our belief that the equality of men and women is a facet of human reality and not just a condition to be achieved for the common good. That which makes human beings human—their inherent dignity and nobility—is neither male nor female. The search for meaning, for purpose, for community; the capacity to love, to create, to persevere, has no gender. Such an assertion has profound implications for the organization of every aspect of human society.

We see religion not as a set of dogmas, or conflicting denominations. Rather, we posit that religion is an ongoing process through which humanity becomes conscious of the spiritual dimension of human life and learns to orient its individual and collective life accordingly. At the core of religion is a set of spiritual principles, which, together, form the common heritage of humankind. At each stage of human history and development—and no less today in the midst of an emerging global community—religion acquires new meanings, significance, functions and expressions. Today, as the insights of women are increasingly recognized as essential to the creation of healthy families, more peaceful communities, more vibrant intellectual life, and more effective governance, it is their voices in particular that must inform the discourse on the nature of religion and its role in contemporary life.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its progeny of human rights instruments have provided the international community with a normative framework, which recognizes the inherent dignity of the individual and elaborates the rights and responsibilities upon which a peaceful society can be built. The most challenging task for governments and communities alike has been the translation of these norms into a lived reality for the peoples of the world. Legal standards and social science affirm the equality of all human beings, however it is the deep-seated beliefs about the nature of women and men and the relationship between them that have proven to be the most formidable obstacles to the realization of an equitable social order. Twenty years after the (then) largest gathering of Heads of State and civil society brought gender equality to the top of the global agenda, discrimination against women remains the most widespread injustice in the world today.

It is well documented that throughout history, much of humanity has looked to religions and their leaders for guidance and continues to do so today. While many thought that modernity would diminish the influence of religion—a seeming victory of the ‘rational mind’ over ‘irrational’ beliefs—this has not come to pass. Religion is reasserting itself in myriad ways. In the name of religion has been raised the call to service to the common weal; to embracing a common humanity that transcends divisions of nations and race; to stewardship for the environment; to forgiveness and reconciliation. The role of religion as a shaper of culture and community life has been increasingly acknowledged by the UN. Having recognized the ability of faith-based organizations to reach and provide human and material resources in underserved regions, a number of UN agencies have sought to partner with these organizations in pursuit of common goals. Several hundred religious NGOs have been granted Consultative Status with the UN’s Economic and Social Council and are active contributors to discussions at the UN.

At the same time, religion has fallen prey to ignorance and blind ambition. In its name, fanaticism and violence are promoted. Interpretations of religious doctrines as assigning an inferior status to women and girls have given rise to patriarchal systems and structures, which continue to obstruct women’s full participation in society. The international community finds itself severely challenged by the intransigence of societies who continue to obstruct the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and flagrantly violate the human rights of women based on interpretations of religious law. In some countries, for example, marital rape remains outside of the law; a man’s honor is a viable defense for murdering a female member of his family; no minimum age requirement for marriage exists. In other countries, women have no right to divorce or to inherit; their education is considered optional or unnecessary; they are not present in public spaces and governing structures. While still prevalent, the incidence of such examples is in decline. Progress can be seen in the increased participation of women in public life and community affairs; it can be discerned in the significant efforts of many countries to effect change through strategies focused on the education of women and girls.

At this stage in the collective life of humanity, we wish to draw the Commission’s attention to three areas of endeavor, which we feel are critical to addressing the present-day situation of women and girls.

1. *Responsibility of religious leaders.* Religious leaders have a pivotal role to play in addressing the profound injustices that prevent women and girls from developing their potential and playing their rightful role in the advancement of society. If they are to be worthy partners in the construction of a more just and peaceful society, religious leaders must unhesitatingly raise their voices against the violation of human rights, against all forms of violence and fanaticism, and against the denial of equality perpetrated in the name of religion. They must examine the ways in which their words, their actions, or their silence have enabled the status quo. They must account for the ways in which their guidance and example may be stifling the exercise of those intellectual faculties that distinguish humankind. Governments have a role to play in encouraging reflection on these issues.
2. *The role of men and boys.* The equality of women and men is not a condition whose effects will be limited to half of the world’s population. Its operationalization will revolutionize all facets of human society—the generation of knowledge and development of intellectual life, the practice of governance, the allocation of material resources and the condition of the family, to name but a few. Men must come to realize that under current conditions of inequality, the development of *their* full potential is not possible. It is they who must find the moral courage to convey and model new understandings of masculinity and who must challenge and question the narrow roles that society and the media have assigned to them. In the final analysis, it is not enough to create space in the current social order for women to play their rightful role. Rather, the goal is for women and men to work shoulder-to-shoulder, each as the helpmate of the other—in the context of family, work, community, and international affairs—to construct a society which allows for

the flourishing of all.

3. *Discrimination against women based on interpretations of religion.* We urge the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to formulate a comment, which addresses discrimination against women based on interpretations of religion, noting that it constitutes a major obstacle to the overarching goal of peace.

The achievement of gender equality will require financial, moral and intellectual resources on a scale not yet seen. It will involve the efforts of the masses of humanity, the insights of religion as well as science, the fearless commitment of men alongside women, unprecedented collaboration at all levels of governance, and an understanding that the advancement of women is the advancement of all. The Baha'i International Community invites all those working towards the betterment of humanity to join us in a dialogue about the issues raised in this statement. It is our hope that in this way we will learn and better understand each other's perspectives and collectively advance our efforts towards the realization of a social order which supports the flourishing of all.

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