

Developing New Dynamics of Power to Transform the Structures of Society

Statement to the 64th Commission on the Status of Women

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action provides a special opportunity to analyse social structures and power dynamics that are hindering the full expression of gender equality. Undoubtedly, there has been considerable progress in many areas, including the advancement of women's rights in legal and policy frameworks, and in broadening girls' access to education in most countries. Perhaps one of the greatest milestones passed has been in the near-universal acknowledgement that women and men are equal. Nevertheless, while the ideal of equality is generally acknowledged, its expression in all facets of life is far from realized. Indeed, a number of recent setbacks around the world with respect to securing previous gains demonstrate the vulnerability of efforts that employ the adversarial methods of the very structures that impede the advancement of women. A deep examination of the current ordering of society is required in order to identify obstacles hindering equality and opportunities for its flourishing. Ultimately, restructuring society based on ideals of oneness, unity and justice is necessary to fully establish gender equality.

When viewed in its broader context, the discrimination against women is one of several symptoms of an ailing social order. Dynamics of domination and opposition have come to define many human relationships, including those between women and men. Efforts to achieve gender equality are frequently framed as battles for power. In its contentious expression, power generates inequality, violence, and exploitation, and cannot easily be oriented to the common or interpersonal good. In a system that is set up like a zero-sum game, it may make sense to fight for access to limited resources and for positions of privilege. Yet, is a zero-sum paradigm the pinnacle of social organization? Can systems and structures be created that allow all people to thrive concurrently? What expressions of power would give rise to such systems and structures?

The Baha'i teachings affirm that all human beings have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization and that each human being has a set of sacred endowments—including consciousness, a heart, and a soul—that allow them to do so. The soul has no gender; biases against women have no foundation in spiritual reality. Humanity as a whole has suffered tremendously by being deprived of the participation of women in every arena of civilization. By working together as partners and co-workers, women and men can learn how to draw on constructive expressions of power that will capacitate their efforts to build a fair and equal society. A generative, constructive form of power that involves tapping into the powers of the human spirit and of the collective would enable the reconstruction of social structures for the benefit of all humanity. It would allow for the upliftment of one to contribute to the upliftment of all, and for the well-being of the collective to ensure the well-being of the individual. It is critical that just and cooperative patterns of relationship be established among individuals, groups, and communities, and between individuals and the institutions of society.

Education is one of the essential solutions that will enable the establishment of patterns of relationship that are commensurate with humanity's needs. Some educational models

indoctrinate children into the harmful norms and logic of existing systems. Naturally, this is not the kind of education being referred to. The United Nations and Member States should invest in educational processes that give attention to developing both the intellectual and spiritual powers of human beings. These models should promote the oneness of humanity and the equality of women and men. They should assist children to develop a genuine love for all human beings; an orientation to service that will help them address challenges over time with patience and steadfastness; a vision of the future that will motivate them to work towards the transformation of harmful customs and values in their local communities that obstruct progress; and an attitude of humility that will enable them to be open to the perspectives of others and free from rigid attachment to their own views and approaches. They should have numerous opportunities to engage in collective, consultative spaces where they can investigate reality dispassionately with their fellow community members, and consider practical ways to improve their localities and environment.

The Role of the United Nations in Releasing the Collective Powers of Humankind

Since the fourth world congress on women in 1995, the discourse on advancing gender equality at the United Nations has centered largely on expanding access to power within current, imbalanced structures. This process has failed to fully address inequalities that have been perpetuated and reinforced across generations. Those who are most favored by the current ordering of society may be reluctant to work for the total transformation of a system they perceive to be of value. Therefore, it will be imperative to create spaces and opportunities for the peoples of the world to participate in processes of social change at every level of society. Many of the populations whose contributions have been overlooked believe in a spiritual dimension of existence, and seek moral solutions to crises of corruption, greed and oppression. The move away from ethics and morality has exacerbated social ills, and has slowed the progress which could be made by harnessing both spiritual and material sources of power. The idea that equality can be established solely through material means, and that its expression is to be found in purely material indicators, is one that many are questioning. While material resources may be limited, many non-material resources are limitless and accessible to all. These include creativity and imagination, consultation and volition, discernment and insight, and the power of unified and concerted action. The discourse on gender equality at the United Nations would be strengthened by creating structures that are more inclusive, based on mutual exchange and learning, and that nurture and channel the powers of the human spirit.

The successful implementation of the goals and frameworks agreed upon at the United Nations is only possible through local action. If communities are the primary arena for action, community members cannot be excluded from decision-making processes regarding their own well-being. It is particularly critical that women have a key voice in determining the process for advancing equality in their societies. Men should welcome and anxiously seek out the contributions of women, recognizing that the welfare of humankind depends on their full participation. It is crucial that women be fully involved in the spaces and processes where decisions are made about the well-being of nations, peoples, and communities. This requires, at all levels of governance, a

bold shift in vision and outlook that is grounded in a firm conviction that the well-being of all people can only be secured through unwavering commitment of world leaders to the betterment of humanity *as a whole*. Lasting gender equality can only come about by building on existing strengths, while abandoning the outmoded beliefs, cultural norms, and practices that have not served humanity's best interests.

What beliefs, norms, and practices will the United Nations, governments, and civil society need to adopt over the next twenty-five years to establish gender equality more fully? If the current adversarial expressions of power have ceased to be useful, how can we ensure that our means are consistent with our desired ends? Ultimately, we are seeking a healthy world that is just, diverse yet unified, and that provides opportunities for all of its inhabitants to grow and prosper. Such a world can only come into existence if women work alongside men to bring it about.