



Raising Men to be Promoters of the Equality of the Sexes

Background Note

The Bahá'í community of India, along with numerous individuals, communities and groups around the country, has over the past many decades made great efforts in promoting the principle of the equality of women and men. While great progress has been made in advancing towards this goal, numerous incidents involving violence against women in society has only served to confirm the distance that yet remains to be covered. As part of its series of roundtable gatherings on advancing towards the equality of women and men titled 'Engendering Equality', the Office of Public Affairs of the Baha'is of India has been organizing gatherings on the theme 'Raising Men to be Promoters of the Equality of the Sexes'.

The basis of equality between women and men is the fact that although physically men and women are different and they experience the world differently, the soul, which is the core of human identity, has no sex. 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. Thus, moving towards equality for both men and women implies raising new generations who have developed a whole range of human qualities and capacities freed from limiting conceptions of femininity and masculinity. The distorted conceptions of femininity – which are based on some form of female objectification and on qualities that make women seem suited only for the domestic sphere – have been extensively critiqued. However, more attention needs to be given to the limiting conceptions of masculinity that boys are socialized into through institutions such as the family, the education system and the media. Immature conceptions of masculinity that equate being manly with being unemotional, inexpressive, aggressive, competitive and authoritative and that relate male sexuality with dominance, conquest and violence towards women - still enjoy wide appeal. Such conceptions distort the natural expression of the personalities of boys by making them suppress their feelings and tender emotions, by not allowing them to admit vulnerability in the presence of others and by placing unreasonable pressure on them to project a false image of themselves. By adopting these conceptions, men deny themselves the experience of being truly human, particularly with regard to their relationship with women. They miss the important lessons of life learned from participating in challenging relationships in which women play an equal role.

To play their part alongside women in building a just society, men would have to overcome these limiting conceptions without succumbing to pressure from a patriarchal society or the fear of ridicule. Through courage and perseverance, new patterns of thought and behavior related to masculinity will have to be ingrained into the culture in which new generations are raised where the conception of manliness includes being nurturing, caring and emotionally expressive and where relationships with women are governed by a spirit of mutual respect, collaboration and equality.

The transformation that is envisioned here requires not only fundamental change in perceptions and consciousness but also in the institutions and structures of society which have certain prejudices embedded in them. Given below are a few questions to help us reflect on some of the implications of these changes:

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 they share equally the responsibilities of managing the household? 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? How can men in the family ensure that their daughters, sisters and wives have opportunities to pursue meaningful and fulfilling work and contribute fully to the life of society rather than being saddled with domestic responsibilities?

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?

Some of the other institutions which have a profound influence on the perpetuation of gender roles are the educational system, religious institutions, cultural institutions related to the media, cinema and literature and the economic system? In what ways can educational systems create critical 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? How can civil society ensure that young boys and girls are protected from content that provides degrading representations for women and men such as pornography?

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