



Seedbeds for Change: Reconceptualizing the Family as a Space for Fostering the Equality of the Sexes

Background Note

Over the past couple of decades, the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India has, in collaboration with a large number of individuals and organizations, sought to advance a discourse on the principle of the equality of women and men. In the past couple of years, a distinct thread of this discourse has emerged focusing on the role of men as promoters of the equality of the sexes. Naturally, these conversations have frequently revolved around the family as a fundamental social institution where conceptions related to the role of women and men are learned and practiced. Not only is the family the first space where human beings learn those patterns of thought and behavior that are associated with being a man or a woman, it also provides the structure where these conceptions are given concrete shape in the form of well-defined gender roles. Thus, a society's advancement towards the goal of the equality of the sexes will remain superficial unless a simultaneous effort is made to refashion the family as an institution that embodies this principle to ever higher degrees. It is for this reason that the Office has decided to initiate a conversation on the kind of changes that the family as an institution would need to undergo to serve as a seedbed for the concepts, attitudes and values that promote the equality of the sexes and to model the kind of transformation that society as a whole would need to achieve.

Like many institutions in our world today, the family is in a state of flux. Inherited conceptions of what a family must be like are being increasingly buffeted and rendered obsolete by the forces of social, cultural and economic change. The conception of the family as a dictatorial space where one or more members (usually serving male privilege) dominate others is being vigorously questioned. Yet, no wholesome alternative to it is visible. It seems clear that not all the individualistic and materialistic forces assailing the traditional conceptions of the family are necessarily positive or desirable in their outcomes. There is the danger that in seeking to dismantle some of the undesirable features of inherited conceptions of the family, the very essence of the family—as a space where children imbibe essential moral values and where bonds of love, trust and mutual support flourish—gets diluted. What is clear is that the model of a family that manifests the principle of the equality of women and men will not come from borrowing templates from the past or from passive and uncritical submission to the forces of modernity. It requires a conscious and conscientious process of learning on the part of society as a whole. It is to contribute to such a process of learning that the Office has initiated these discussions.

Given below are a few themes and questions to stimulate discussion on this subject:

1. **Sharing the functions of nurturance and care-giving:** One of the fundamental functions that a family performs is to educate and nurture children and to take care of the sick and the old. Failure to provide these vital services can have devastating and long-lasting impact on those who are vulnerable. Traditionally, women have played a major role in providing these services of care giving, nurturing, the supervision of the educational needs of children and of the maintenance of an orderly, clean, safe and healthy home. These forms of service are often not valued and are taken for granted. How can the value of such essential work in the home be better recognized? How can boys and men be groomed to take on an equal share in providing these valuable services in the home?
2. **Consultation as the basis for decision-making:** If decision making in a family is not to be an outcome of arbitrary and dictatorial authority, members of the family will need to learn to communicate with each other with respect and openness drawing on a whole range of qualities such as love, humility, tact, empathy, courtesy and moderation. The capacity to consult in a loving, considerate and yet frank manner in arriving at collective decisions is an art whose value humanity is only beginning to appreciate. However, mastery of this art will be crucial for mature and responsible decision making. The family will naturally be one of the primary spaces where members will have the opportunity to learn this art. In the context of the family where each member has their particular rights and responsibilities, what would the process of consultative decision-making look like? How would diverse viewpoints, temperaments, outlooks and life experiences be harmonized in commitment to the common good?
3. **Developing an outward-looking orientation:** While the family strives to achieve the well-being of each of its members, its integrity as an institution serving the social good demands that the ultimate purpose of the family must always be towards serving the well-being of the larger society. Commitment and loyalty to the family cannot be allowed to turn into a form of family or clan worship where the glorification and prosperity of the family takes precedence over the obligation to serve the common good. A family that is conscious of its moral responsibility as a building block of society will always be outward oriented – alive to the needs of the society it lives in and striving to serve these needs with all its capacities. How can this posture of selfless service to the common good be inculcated as a preeminent moral principle guiding family life?
4. **Overcoming domestic violence:** While the family is the space where children receive love, encouragement and positive values, it is also often the setting of their first encounter with grave injustices. One of the worst forms of injustices perpetrated in the family, especially against girls and women, is violence. While physical and sexual abuse are the most egregious manifestations of violence, this pathology of the soul also finds expression in a whole range of other abusive behaviors such as verbal abuse, ridicule and mockery, neglect, emotional and psychological manipulation, intimidation and bullying. In this regard, what can society do to develop zero tolerance for violence in the family whether it be physical, emotional or verbal – and reject all pretexts on which such

violence is condoned whether it be on the grounds of 'familism' where the sanctity and honour of the family takes precedence over the safety of its members or on religious or cultural grounds? How can the spiral of intergenerational violence be broken such that those who are abused do not become the abusers of the next generation? Although legal provisions against violence and enforcement of human rights frameworks can provide strong grounds for creating an atmosphere of deterrence, eventually a culture of freedom from violence can only flourish on the foundation of the inviolable dignity and honour that is the birth right of every individual. What are some of the spiritual conceptions of the nature of the human being that provide the basis for such conceptions of human dignity and honour? How can they be drawn upon to create a culture of mutual respect and peace?

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