

Women's Concerns

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The Policy Review study on UNICEF response to women's concerns (E/ICEF/1985/L.1), being considered by the UNICEF Executive Board at its 1985 session, places great emphasis on a subject of deep concern to the Baha'i-International Community: the education and general development of women. Baha'i- belief in, and practice of, the principle of the equality of men and women for over one hundred years -- now quite visible in Baha'i- communities world-wide -- places special emphasis on the education of women, so long neglected.

While advocating universal compulsory education and the same educational curriculum for both sexes, Baha'i-s are committed to give preference to the education of girls -- an attitudinal change which is already showing far-reaching results. The range of problems relating to women addressed by Baha'i-s as individuals and by Baha'i- local and national communities is very wide. Rural schools, literacy programs, conferences and seminars, for example, are all centered on both the immediate needs of women and on long-range innovative ways to bring women into the mainstream of social action.

However, even though the Baha'i- International Community supports special programs for the development of women, our experience has shown that the education of both sexes is important to the advancement of women -- that programs which neglect to educate men in the equality of the sexes, leading to an acceptance of this just principle, must fail, since the healthy condition of the family, as the basic unit of society, necessarily requires the responsible contribution of both men and women. In all instances where family structure and influence are weak, problems for its members multiply -- especially for children. In efforts to strengthen the family, Baha'i-s are assuming new commitments -- to fidelity for both partners in marriage, and to a higher standard of responsibility for both parents as well as the community at large for the education and well-being of children. These changing social patterns in Baha'i- communities can even be seen in societies where traditional attitudes and popular behavior are especially inimical to such values. Baha'i- men support the education and development of women, and are becoming more responsible in relationship to the family. Women, in turn, are increasingly undertaking active roles outside the home, and are beginning to distinguish themselves through their intellectual and scientific achievements. They are participating in consultation and decision-making in the affairs of the family as well as in activities at a local, national and international community level.

The importance to development of the participatory approach, as noted in the Policy Review, traces back "to the basic services strategy which emphasizes the necessity for communities to participate in defining and solving their own problems." The Baha'i- International Community is entirely in agreement with

this "bottom-up" approach stressing self/collective reliance. The most successful development is, we believe, one that rises from an understanding of the material, intellectual and spiritual potentialities of human beings and seeks to utilize the unique talents and skills of each person.

The administrative structure which Baha'i-s are finding so effective -- now functioning in over 140 countries and in varied cultural environments representing 2000 ethnic backgrounds -- provides conditions for a continuous growth in understanding and application of these development principles. It encourages universal participation, in consultation and decision-making, in the smallest community on up. An important element of this system is an election process by secret ballot, free from the practice of nominations and electioneering. Members of the local community elect by free choice those men and women they feel best qualified to make decisions on a whole range of human concerns. The elected administrative council regularly consults with all members of the community at large, drawing from the diversity of viewpoints that necessarily exists in every situation. Once decisions of the council are reached by unanimous or majority vote, everyone in the community is committed to uphold them, ensuring in this way the unified support of the community at large. This joint decision-making process eliminates the evils of political partisanship that seek to undermine a plan of action, and prevents the influence of pressure groups promoting special interests.

Such a system, the Baha'i- International Community believes, is well-suited to advance the education and development of all participants, as the process has influence on the behavior of the individual, whose contribution, in turn, enlarges the vision of the group. This "bottom-up" approach provides, above all, for evolutionary growth while maintaining unity at each stage of development.

There is also a great need, we feel, to include in education for development, encouragement to practice cooperative rather than competitive approaches that often lead the individual to seek for domination over others or to take advantage over them for self-gain. Baha'i-s believe that attitudes promoting an unbridled materialism have resulted in a competitive struggle for material gain which has exacerbated economic and social problems. Cooperative attitudes and respect for others in the family are seen to encourage the realization of rights for everyone: the respect for children and for women is enhanced in families where moral and spiritual values underlie the concern for material well-being. Cooperative approaches involving respect for the potential realization of the highest qualities in every human being, when extended from the family to the nation and the world, hold great promise, we suggest, for lessening and eventually abolishing the divisive prejudices of race, class, nationality, and sex which have seriously inhibited growth and development.

The social and economic issues which humanity is trying to resolve can only be met as people learn respect for the rights of others, assume responsibility to build good character, and dedicate themselves, in the spirit of service, to the interests of the whole of humankind. Understanding of development will, we

feel, grow as all of us become increasingly aware of the interdependence and organic unity of humanity.

The Baha'i- International Community holds in high regard its growing collaboration with UNICEF, at headquarters and in the field, and we anticipate continued opportunities for close cooperation in building a better world for all peoples.

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