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Family Life. A family is a household of people related by blood or marriage. More specifically, we can define a family as husband and wife (or one parent), with or without never-married children, living together in the same dwelling. A household may contain more than two generations of people.

1. PURPOSE OF FAMILY

The family is given great importance as it should form the basis of both the individual's spiritual development and happiness, and society's cohesion and advancement. It constitutes "as the bedrock of the whole structure of human society" (KA: 223). Attitudes and relationships developed in the family, when transformed to ever-wider circles of the community, can have a direct bearing on the order, peace, and wealth of an entire nation (SWAB: 279).

The Bahá'í view of the family is best expressed in terms of the position of each individual member to each other to be equivalent to their relationship to God. Thus, the efforts of parents to educate their son and daughter should be seen in the same light as educating God's children.

The family provides a fertile ground to nurture children, the future adults, to love the Creator, to become spiritually minded, to "conform to the rules of good conduct," to acquires "all the graces and praiseworthy qualities of humankind," amongst other virtues (PTF, 63).

2. STRUCTURE AND NORMS

a. Bahá'í Structure of Family. There is only a general sketch that defines the structure of the Bahá'í family.

Bahá'í Writings suggest that the extended family, rather than the nuclear family, will be the norm. The distribution of inheritance, for instance, suggests the importance of the extended family.

Although the father is the "head" of the household (Letter from House of Justice, 28 Dec. 1980), both parents carry the authority and primary responsibility for the family. The Kitab-i-Aqdas enjoins parents to

instruct their sons and daughters to read and write (KA, para. 48) and to "rear them in the bosom of sciences and arts" (SWAB, 127). It is expected that counselling children takes place over a long period (SWAB, 135).

The mother, as the "first educator of the child" (SWAB, 138), occupies the most important position during the early years of family life, responsible for the spiritual and material education of her children. She should "nurture the health" of her children and guard them from disease" (SWAB, 126). The mother has the right to be supported by her husband, while he has no such rights.

The husband's primary responsibility is to "provide for and protect the family" (Family Life, 30). Fatherhood is forfeited when a father fails to assume these responsibilities.

Children have the duty and moral obligation to obey their parents (Letter from House of Justice, 28 Dec. 1980). According to Bahá'u'lláh (Bahá'í Education, 4), children will not learn to obey their Creator, if they do not obey their parents. The eldest son, in particular, has the moral obligation to see to the needs of his mother and her offspring.

`Abdu'l-Bahá (PUP, 168) emphasized the need to constantly consider the "integrity of the family," and the importance of not transgressing the rights of any family member. Each member of the household has prerogatives. If their rights and prerogatives are not maintained, it is impossible to sustain the unity of the family. In the Bahá'í view, all members of the family have "mutual and complementary duties" (Ltr from House of Justice, 28 Dec. 1980).

Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes the importance of blood lines, as indicated in the distribution of inheritance and the need to obtain consent for marriage from one's biological parents, even when one is adopted. The Kitab-i-Aqdas (q.v.) prescribes monogamy and forbids one's marrying his or her stepparent. Cohabitation, and trial, companionate, and common-law marriages are not allowed.

b. Bahá'í norms. The division of labour and household tasks are not specified in the Bahá'í writings, except for the education of children. Some Bahá'í authors (e.g. Hellaby, 16) have remarked that the Bahá'í teachings place responsibility for the early, informal training of children in the hands of the mother, while the father must see to the later, formal aspects of their education. Homemaking is "a highly honourable and responsible work of fundamental importance to society" (KA, 193). Even when such a division is specified, family circumstances and the course of family life, foresee a deeper involvement of the father in the early stages of the education of children, and the mother's assuming tasks outside the home.

Hospitality constitutes a key ingredient of family life. Essential to hospitality is the ability to welcome people of diverse background and offering food and shelter. When hospitality is offered to a gathering of Bahá'ís, the home becomes a "congress of the spirit"

(SWAB, 94).

Each household creates a physical environment which, in turn, reflects back on the family. A family committed to providing a clean and safe environment, including proper physical nourishment and hygiene of its members, benefits in ways that lend support to its primary goals. Cleanliness has an effect on spirituality. The KA (para. 151) ordains that every 19 years, if possible, the furnishings of one's home should be renewed, to promote "refinement and cleanliness."

Relationships within the family should be characterized as "not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation" (Ltr from House of Justice, 28 Dec. 1980). Neither husband nor wife should "unjustly dominate" the other (Ltr from Guardian's secretary on his behalf, 22 July 1943).

While embracing advanced societal goals, family relationships appear to affirm traditional norms. For example, daughters must be trained to become "more self-effacing, more humble, and will defer to and obey their parents and forebears, and be a comfort and a solace to all" (PUP, 190).

Bahá'u'lláh gives children the obligation to serve their parents, and "categorically states that after the recognition of the oneness of God, the most important of all duties for children is to have due regard for the rights of their parents" (KA, "Questions and Answers"). These duties extend beyond the death of parents for in return for the trouble and hardship endured by parents in raising children, children must "show forth charity and beneficence and must implore [from God] pardon and forgiveness for their parents" (SAQ, Ch. 62).

The Bahá'í Writings have no explicit statements on family planning or birth control.

3. SPIRITUAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING

a. Sources of harmony. A pattern of harmony in family life requires, in the Bahá'í view, conscious attention to teach and develop spiritual qualities among its members. Of note are these qualities: truthfulness and trustworthiness, a sense of justice, moderation, respect for others, good manners, obedience, self-discipline, and kindness (Hellaby, 26). Ruhe (1986) lists 20 qualities.

Special prayers have been revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá for parents and children. In the face of difficulties, prayers restore tranquillity in the family.

The development of the art of loving consultation is a source of harmony, and one of "the keys to the strengthening of unity" (Ltr from House of Justice, 28 Dec. 1980). It is a difficult skill, because it is premised on trust and the need to know what the other person considers a valid area open for consultation. Unlike groups of three or more, a Bahá'í couple cannot resolve their differences by a majority vote. Under those circumstances, the Universal House of Justice advises that there are times when one should defer to the other (Ltr, 28 Dec. 1980).

It is instructive to note that the Bahá'í teachings clearly encouraged attention to one's family, if it came to having to decide between

doing Bahá'í work or family work. Yet, in some instances when a family experiences difficulties, the family may well consider together devoting their time to Bahá'í work as an effective solution to family problems (SWAB, 140).

b. Sources of disharmony and strain. Since the Bahá'í writings encourage inter-cultural marriages, it stands to reason that Bahá'í families can be subject to more cultural differences of the partners than is the case among many other families. A thoughtful attitude and behavior about what elements of cultural diversity contribute to unity, and which ones contribute to disunity, may go a long way to resolving disharmony.

The ideology of material acquisitiveness and consumerism, whereby one's identity is premised on material possessions and hoarding, also produce strain in a family. It is easy to forsake spiritual goals for material ones.

Hardship can be a another source of strain within a family. In this connection, it is interesting to note the Bahá'í Writings' emphasis on accustoming children to hardship (Bahá'í Education, 31). What seems to matter most, then, is the family's positive or negative attitude towards difficulties. A positive attitude results in moral and spiritual development.

4. THE BAHA'I FAMILY IN THE WIDER WORLD

a. The Bahá'í family in the Bahá'í Community. Bahá'í families occupy a particular niche in Bahá'í community life. Among the "essential obligation" of parents includes "the active participation by children in Bahá'í community life" (UHJ, Nawruz, 1974). Service to the community, Bahá'í or otherwise, is perceived as a goal of families. In the experience of many Bahá'í families, the wider Bahá'í community acts as the wider, extended family (Hellaby, 71).

There are many opportunities for families around the world who wish to build a Bahá'í identity. Bahá'í families participate in Nineteen-Day Feasts and the holding of Bahá'í Holy Days. Daily prayer and reading from the Sacred Writings constitute another means of strengthening Bahá'í identity. Attending Bahá'í summer and winter schools as a family promote such an identity, as well as the cultivation of the Bahá'í habit of hospitality, consultation, and valuing diversity. Withdrawing children from school (and parents from work) on Bahá'í Holy Days gives families an opportunity to affirm their Bahá'í identity.

`Ayyam-i-Há has become a particularly fruitful time to strengthen this identity. Some authors (e.g. Ruhe, 19) recommend that the family "associate closely with four or five families" who share that family's values and ideals. Family travelling-teaching trips are also helpful in that regard.

Bahá'í communities, moreover, have an obligation to strengthen Bahá'í family life; spiritual assemblies should be

"concerned with ... families whom it must constantly encourage to unite in a distinctive Bahá'í society" (Seven Year Plan).

b. The Cultural Matrix. Because the Bahá'í community is world-wide, one can expect that response to the Bahá'í teachings on family life to be quite varied. The presence of many different cultures in the Bahá'í world community today prevents the development of what constitutes the ideal Bahá'í family. The Bahá'í family is an evolving concept, because currently Bahá'í families bring much of their own culture into family life (Tanaka, Bahá'í Studies Notebook, 138). Some cultures have a heightened sense of privacy among the members of a family, while others eschew any notion of privacy. Yet, both cultures may perceive their relationships as "close."

Perhaps the most significant Bahá'í teaching for family life, affecting families in all cultures, concerns the equality of men and women: first, in their relations to each other, the parents, and second, the impact of this teaching on children. What may be viewed as a distinctive Bahá'í element of family life is the critical importance of educating daughters which is "more necessary than that of sons," if it is not possible to provide an education to all. In the Bahá'í view, through educated mothers, the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society (KA, "Notes;" BE, 30). "Mothers are the first educators of the new generation." It will, nevertheless, take many generations for families to loosen themselves of their cultural matrix and become more closely identified with the spirit and practice of giving primary importance to the education of daughters. Even in countries where education is available to both sons and daughters, the choice of educational goals may still follow traditional lines, such as encouraging sons in the technical fields, and daughters in the humanities.

In a wider perspective, one could argue that in the past the family was primarily an economic unit, fostering the inequality of men and women. The Industrial Revolution has also separated men from family and household life. The Bahá'í writings see the family in spiritual terms (Ltr from the House of Justice to NSAs, 17 April 1981), although material welfare is not discounted, destined to foster equality between the sexes. Some scholars (e.g. Linda and John Walbridge, 1986) suggest that the Bahá'í teachings bring men back into the family.

c. Current Trends in Family Life. The aspirations and tasks of family life are such that it is essential to "husband" all available resources to their success. Current trends in family life, however, make such goals even more difficult to fulfill. While many Bahá'í families may feel the urgent need to protect their members from these aspects in contemporary society, others will also recognize that they have already "inherited" these disintegrating trends.

Regarding family violence, the Bahá'í Writings are

categorically opposed to the use of force, or the threat of force. Such behavior is seen as a "flagrant transgression of the Bahá'í Teachings" (Ltr from Universal House of Justice, 24 Jan. 1993). The Bahá'í Writings, however, indicate inappropriate uses of parental authority: to be too harsh, to censure, use physical force, vilify, and to verbally abuse family members. Parents could lose their rights as parents if they abuse children (Ltr from House of Justice to an individual, 24 Jan. 1993).

With respect to step families which are increasingly becoming the norm in Western society (often termed "blended families"), the Bahá'í Writings urge the maintenance of family unity, whether in step-families, or not.

The Bahá'í Faith stands opposed to non-marital cohabitation and premarital sex, or in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "companionate marriage, infidelity in marital relationships, and all manner of promiscuity, of easy familiarity, and of sexual vices" (ADJ, 26). As a consequence, the building of a strong family is not distracted by relationships and behaviors that take devotion, time, and energy away from forming a family.

For Bahá'í communities there are two kinds of lone-parent families. On one hand, one finds families with only one parent due to separation, divorce, death, or non-marital reproduction. On the other hand, one may expect to find a two-parent household, only one of whom is a Bahá'í. In both instances, the Bahá'í parent may experience isolation in attempting to guide her or his family along Bahá'í lines (Brilliant Stars, 91). These attempts are greatly strengthened when the Bahá'í community provides the necessary support or when the non-Bahá'í parent is sympathetic to these efforts (Hellaby, 118). In any event, one can note differences in whether the mother or father is a Bahá'í. It seems that it is relatively easier for mothers to maintain a Bahá'í dynamic in the family, than for fathers (cf. BE, 51).

The Bahá'í position on women and work outside the home is clear. The concept of a Bahá'í family implies that woman is the primary educator of the family, and the man has the primary responsibility for the financial support of the family. Nevertheless, this "by no means implies that these functions are inflexibly fixed and cannot be changed and adjusted to suit particular family situations, nor does it mean that the place of the woman is confined to the home" (W, 31). It is anticipated that fathers would would play a role in the education of children and mothers could be breadwinners. Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that everyone must "engage in some form of occupation, such as crafts, trades, and the like" (TB, 26).

As is already evident, society has, however minimally, responded to such situations, either by readjusting work schedules, job sharing, reducing the hours of work outside the home, extended maternity or paternity leaves, and the like. No doubt, other possibilities will be considered as the

Bahá'í concept of family life becomes more firmly established in the world and society attaches greater importance to household life and the raising of children. Naturally, each family will, moreover, achieve its own distinctive approach to such matters, to be decided through consultation and experience.

5. DEMOGRAPHIC ASPECTS OF BAHA'I FAMILY LIFE

No scholars, whether Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í, have devoted research to the demographic aspects of families in the Bahá'í community. Various national Bahá'í communities have collected Bahá'í census data (e.g. United States, Canada), but they are not available or have, as yet, not been analyzed. There are at present no means to corroborate or disprove assertions about the "high rate of failure for Bahá'í marriages in the West" (e.g. Khavari, Bahá'í Studies Notebook, 1983: 66)

There are, nevertheless, general observations which we can glean from Bahá'í news reports. The demographic characteristics of Bahá'í families seem to correlate with the relative age of the Bahá'í community. For example, one is more likely to find complete Bahá'í families--where all members are Bahá'ís--in the Middle East, where the Bahá'í community has existed longer than elsewhere.

Geography also seems a determining factor in the kind of Bahá'í families we can expect to find. For example, it is more common in the so-called Third World to find men who are Bahá'ís, in contrast to Western societies where Bahá'í women outnumber the Bahá'í men (cf. Hellaby, 98). These differences are bound to be reflected in the makeup and social dynamics in Bahá'í families, whether complete or incomplete.

6. BAHA'I LITERATURE ON FAMILY LIFE

a. Bahá'í Writings. Letters from the Universal House of Justice, 28 Dec. 1980, and 24 Jan. 1993 are key documents discussing the relationship between men and women in family life, and violence and sexual abuse of women and children, respectively. Preserving Bahá'í Marriages (1991) is a memorandum and compilation prepared by the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life (1983), Bahá'í Consultation, and Bahá'í Education are other compilations of Bahá'í writings pertaining to family life.

b. Prescriptive and Educational Works. Education in the Bahá'í Family (Madeline Hellaby, 1987) discusses the education of children from a Western perspective as a basic principle of family life, with particular focus on character training and the equality between the sexes. Mothers, Fathers and Children (A. Furutan, 1980) provides, from a Middle-Eastern viewpoint, practical advice to parents. When We Grow Up (B. Nakhjavání, 1979) explores general issues of raising children in the light of Bahá'í teachings. Guidelines for

Parents (Margaret Ruhe, 1986) provides much practical advice to parents. The Australian Bahá'í Community published A Bahá'í Parenting Programme (1990) which presents practical suggestions and extracts from the Bahá'í Writings on parenting. A Fortress for Well-Being: Bahá'í Teachings on Marriage (BPT, USA, 1973 and later editions) continues to be a popular guide for those who wish to start a family. Other popular manuals include Creating a Successful Family (by Khavari and Khavari, 1989), The Family Repair Manual (by Agnes Ghaznavi, 1989), Bahá'í Families (by Patricia Wilcox, 1991), Creating a Spiritual Home: Mother's Book (also: Teacher's Guide) by Deborah Christensen and Delane Hein, both published in 1985 in Nairobi.

c. Literary, Musical, and Children's Works Related to Families. There is a modest selection of literary works dealing with family life. There is a greater selection of musical works, in the form of cassette tapes, and children's books and magazines (See "Literature, Bahá'í"). The Chosen Highway by Lady Blomfield (1967) provides a glimpse of family life in Bahá'u'lláh's household.

d. Scholarly Works. Linda and John Walbridge ("Bahá'í Laws on the Status of Men," World Order, 1986) discuss how Bahá'í teachings regard men as an integral part of the family. H.T.D. Rost (The Brilliant Stars: The Bahá'í Faith and the Education of Children, 1979), based on research for a Ph.D. thesis, offers a chapter on the "Role of the Family, Community, and School." The Divine Institution of Marriage (Bahá'í Studies Notebook, March 1983) has a number of articles dealing with family therapy, love, parental authority, and domestic violence. Janet Huggins in "Exploring Male Oppression from a Family-Systems Perspective" (J.B.S., 3.2, 1990: 47-55) speaks of the need to avoid the villain-victim dichotomy in attempts to resolve male oppression. "The Impact of Religion, Socioeconomic Status, and Degree of Religiosity in Family Planning Amongst Moslems and Bahá'ís in Iran" Ed.D., U. of Northern Colorado (1981) by Mehri Samandari Jensen contrasts Muslim and Bahá'í fertility rates in Iran.

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