

about

feminism. There are two things which need to be raised. Firstly, men should be encouraged

to think and write about feminism, as I have been by my feminist friends.

Although

primarily concerned with women, feminism should not be restricted to women.

Anybody

concerned with the way people are treated should be concerned with feminism, given that

half the world's population is female. Also, if men study feminism, they can learn to

understand and support it, make changes in their own lives, as well as

influence other

men. The process of ending the subordination of women would surely be hastened if men

increasingly came to support the process, rather than being hostile or

indifferent to the

process. On the other hand (and this is the second thing I wish to mention

here, and is of

equal importance), men involved in feminism need an additional measure of humility. It is

one thing to be trying to empathise with another viewpoint, it is something

very different

to inherently possess that viewpoint - and men must be aware of and respect this

difference. And there must be no valid reason for any one to suspect that

feminism is

being 'hijacked' by men.

The main aim of this section on feminism and the Bahá'í Faith is to prepare Bahá'í scholars as well as the larger Bahá'í community for the inevitable encounter that I think must occur between the Bahá'í Faith and feminism.

Before

proceeding, I will take some time to elaborate on why I think that such an

encounter will

occur.

As I have said before and as I will say again in detail, there are some things

about

the Bahá'í Faith that feminists will definitely object to. Yet at the moment,

most

feminists do not know enough about the Bahá'í Faith to be aware of the areas

that

they might not agree with. Even if some feminists did know of these areas, it

is very

unlikely that they would be overly concerned about what the Bahá'í teachings

were

anyway, since the Bahá'í Faith is such a small religion.

Yet because of Shoghi Effendi's and the Universal House of Justice's vision of 'entry by troops' and 'mass conversion,'[3] I believe as a Bahá'í that the Bahá'í Faith is going to grow significantly in the near future. We know that this growth in numbers will be followed by and associated with various forms of opposition to the Bahá'í Faith.[4] I think it and natural and inevitable that as the Bahá'í Faith grows, feminists (as well as scholars of all backgrounds) will begin taking it seriously and studying it, and when they do this, they will see things in the Bahá'í Faith that they will not like, and at least some will try to oppose the Faith.

This encounter between the Bahá'í movement and the feminist movement is best viewed as a challenge that offers both negative and positive possibilities for the Bahá'í Faith. It is our duty, as Bahá'ís and aspiring Bahá'í scholars, to do what we can to minimise the negative and maximise the positive that can come from this encounter. It is with this in mind that I have devised the following plan of action.

This plan of action has four inter-related parts:

Studying feminism.

Defending the Bahá'í Faith against actual and potential feminist criticism.

Showing the good that the Bahá'í Faith can do for women.

Striving to apply the Bahá'í teachings on gender equality in the Bahá'í community.

The first part of the plan of action is to study feminism. Ideally this will take the form of an on-going commitment or interest. When we study feminism, we will see that feminism is not really "the enemy". In a lot of areas the Bahá'í Faith and feminism are completely compatible and are true allies. This must always be remembered, even when we speak of 'opposition' and 'encounters'. Sometimes friends do misunderstand each other.

By studying feminism we will find that the Bahá'í Faith can and must learn things from feminism. It will also become evident that feminism would be more effective if it embraced some Bahá'í insights.

Also, it is only by being informed about feminism that it be possible for us to

do the other three things in the plan of action. If we are ignorant about what feminism is really about, we will not be able to understand feminist criticism of the Bahá'í Faith, let alone make an adequate defence. We will not realise what the Bahá'í teachings can offer to feminism, and we will not be able to effectively identify and remedy whatever sexual inequality may exist within the Bahá'í community.

The second part of the plan of action is to defend the Bahá'í Faith from feminist critiques.

There are numerous parts of the Bahá'í Faith that most feminists will find problematic, to put things mildly. Here is a non-exhaustive list, ranging from the relatively well-known to the relatively obscure.

That only men can be elected to the Universal House of Justice.

The bias towards men in the Bahá'í intestacy laws.

That the Bahá'í construction of and emphasis on motherhood reinforces traditional gender stereotypes.[5]

The condemnation of homosexual relationships. (Some feminists view compulsory heterosexuality as being one of the main pillars of patriarchy[6]). We need to explain the Bahá'í teachings on homosexuality, and show how liberating the Bahá'í teachings on gender can be.

We need to explain why marriage is emphasised so much in the Bahá'í Faith and show how our view on marriage and morality is different from other outworn views.

We need to look at Bahá'í views about contraception and abortion, issues that are quite central for most contemporary feminists.[7]

The whole concept that men and women have equal stations but different functions.

Feminists are often very wary of 'equal but different' arguments.[8] Some conservative Christian and Muslim groups, in which women have a clearly subordinate position, have similar concepts of equality. We need to show that our concept is distinct - at least in the application, if not in the theory.

The exemptions that women can have for obligatory prayer, fasting and pilgrimage.[9]

We have to resist the temptation to sweep these issues under the carpet. That is no answer, the only answer is to face these issues head on and deal with them, difficult as it is. It is ultimately futile to try to hide these things, try as we might, they will eventually get out into the open anyway, and when they do they will cause great damage. This will be especially so if we have spent all of our time telling people how good the Bahá'í Faith is for women. People could justifiably think that Bahá'ís have been less than honest, offering things to women with one hand while taking things away with the other hand.

The immediate task is one of damage control. It is vital that we explain what these things do and don't mean, and give a sympathetic interpretation of these things - an interpretation that is as least problematic to feminists as possible.

Of course, this cannot be taken too far. We cannot misrepresent or misinterpret the Bahá'í teachings so as to avoid offending anyone. At the end of the day, we have to stand by our sympathetic interpretation and defend it as best we can.

One possible defence strategy is to argue that these problematic areas are to be interpreted with reference to the general teaching of the equality of men and women, and not vice versa.[10]

From here, it might be possible to find a favourable reason for the particular thing.

Sometimes - as is the case with the membership of the Universal House of Justice - no favourable reason can be found. In these circumstances, all that can be done is to attempt to put the matter in context, and show that all the ways in which the Bahá'í Faith can benefit women (part three of the plan of action) will more than adequately compensate for this area of inequality.

There are no easy victories here. It is likely that each answer, far from satisfying critics, will raise in turn a many other questions. Success is not about trying to find the one 'Answer' that will silence critics, but being able and willing to

participate in an on-going dialogue.

Part three is showing how the Bahá'í Faith can benefit women. This is perhaps the most exciting area to work in, because it involves looking at the positive and at the links between feminism and the Bahá'í Faith. There is already a substantial body of Bahá'í scholarship in this area.[11] Listed below are some topics in this category which might also be studied:

The potential of the Bahá'í Faith in solving the problem of the 'second shift'[12].

This problem arises in families where both spouses are employed, yet it is still the woman who ends up doing most of the housework.

Radical feminists often argue that it is far from adequate to treat women as the legal equals of men.[13] Doing this is not only ineffective in bringing about real sexual equality, it justifies existing sexual inequality by claiming these things to be manifestations of real gender differences. For example, that there are still comparatively very few female politicians or business women with real power, despite the absence of legal impediments, is often explained by saying that women just aren't interested in or are good at these things. In reality, it is not equality to be allowed to play a game, if the rules (which you didn't make and can't change) work against you. It often seems as if women can only be equals to the extent that they are like men. To the extent that women work in different jobs than men, have family responsibilities that men don't have, act differently from the way that men are meant to act in our capitalistic system (first and foremost as rational, self-interested and independent wealth maximisers), become pregnant or have the possibility of becoming pregnant, to this extent women can't have equality. At the moment, if a woman wants political or economic success, she will have to act like a man. There is ample scope here for Bahá'ís to show how Bahá'í concepts can add to such arguments.

How the Bahá'í Faith is more likely to be successful in influencing men than feminists ever could. As I said earlier, there is a large degree of overlap

between feminism and the Bahá'í Faith. This means that for Bahá'í men, many feminist truths are (or ought to be) of the highest moral authority.[14]

Also, the Bahá'í Faith is more likely to be successful in influencing conservative groups in society than feminists could. There is also a high level of polarisation between feminists and conservative groups at the moment - there is virtually no dialogue between the two[15], except for an exchange of insults. The Bahá'í community embraces many diverse elements, including those who are conservative and those who are progressive on gender issues. Within the Bahá'í community, these issues can be dealt with. Admittedly this will not be easy, but at least people will be able to disagree and still respect and listen to each other, and in time a resolution might be found.

This flows on to the fourth and final part of the plan of action: applying the Bahá'í teachings on sexual equality to the Bahá'í community. This is perhaps the most difficult thing of all to do, because it will test the unity of the Bahá'í community at a time when the utmost unity and focus are required. However, for my part, I find it difficult to see how local and national Bahá'í administrative institutions could be regarded as mature if they do not address this. Another reason why this must be done is Bahá'u'lláh's warning that we as Bahá'ís mustn't let our deeds differ from our words.[16] If we are saying to the world that the Bahá'í Faith upholds the equality of men and women, and saying how beneficial the Bahá'í Faith can be for women, then we have no choice but to ensure that we are doing our utmost to put these Bahá'í teachings into practice. Otherwise, our words will mean nothing and will command no respect, and we will be defenceless against accusations of hypocrisy and worse.

This is potentially a large area, and I can only mention a few of the questions that we should be asking.[17] Who is doing what in the Bahá'í communities? If a Bahá'í public meeting is being held, who are the speakers, and who is washing up the

cups and
looking after the kids? Who are the chairpeople of our assemblies, and who are the
secretaries? Who does most of the talking at nineteen day feasts and assembly
meetings and
Bahá'í studies conferences? Who teaches and runs our children's classes? We
need to be asking these questions on a local, regional, national, continental
and
international level. And if the answers show that these things are not being
fairly shared
between men and women (as I suspect will be so, but I can do no more than
suspect this),
we need to work out why, and remedy the problem.

2. Men and the Bahá'í Faith

Why am I writing about this topic?[18] Immediately after looking at feminism
and the
Bahá'í Faith, I feel persuaded to think that men must be the most fortunate
creatures in the universe. But I am afraid that I cannot be swayed. From my own
bitter
experience I know that men are really suffering at the moment.

Near the beginning a book intended to be an introduction to the men's movement,
Manhood,
the author Steve Biddulph wrote the following:

Here are some of the facts about being a man in the late 20th Century:

Men on average live for six years less than women do.

Men routinely fail at close relationships. (Just two indicators: forty percent
of
marriages break down, and divorces are initiated by the woman in four out of
five cases.)

Over ninety percent of convicted acts of violence will be carried out by men,
seventy percent of the victims will be men.

In school, around ninety percent of children with behaviour problems are boys
and
over eighty percent of children with learning problems are also boys.

The leading cause of death amongst men between 12 and 60 is self-inflicted
death.

Surely, the most powerful reflection on the male gender is its suicide rate.
Men and
boys commit suicide five times more frequently than women. (The rate for men
exceeds the
road toll, though the two are probably blurred together. A 'single vehicle
accident' is often impossible to differentiate.)[19]

That women are also suffering does not make men's suffering less real, and vice versa.

It would seem that men are in a very degraded position at the moment. Arguably men's degradation is more severe, because it appears to be primarily self-inflicted.

Women's degradation is almost entirely caused by external factors - which makes it more unjust and unacceptable, but not as degrading.

Thinking about all this made me curious about what the Bahá'í writings say about men and masculinity. I had a look and could not find one good thing in the Bahá'í writings about men! All I could find were rather negative statements about masculinity.

Men have more forceful and aggressive qualities both in body and mind[20], and men are more inclined to war[21].

And before I continue, I wish to mention that these statements about men and women should be interpreted as mere generalisations. They don't purport to speak about all men and women.

Yet during my search through the Bahá'í writings, I came across many general references to women, all of which were extremely positive. It would seem that women are more more tender-hearted[22], receptive[23], intuitive[24], merciful[25], sympathetic[26], mentally alert[27], loving[28], philanthropic[29], and more responsive towards the needy and suffering than men are[30]. Moreover, women are inflexibly opposed to war and are the lovers of peace[31]. There is one quotation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá which I would like to set forth in full. I shall refer to this quotation as the 'Lioness quote':

...The woman is indeed of the greater importance to the race. She has the greater burden and the greater work. Look at the vegetable and the animal worlds. The palm which carries the fruit is the tree most prized by the date grower. The Arab knows that for a long journey the mare has the longest wind. For her greater strength and fierceness, the lioness is more feared by the hunter than the lion. The woman has greater moral courage than the man; she has also special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger

and crisis....[32]

The Lioness quote and others like it made me wonder just how meaningful the Bahá'í teaching of the equality of men and women really is. I can only describe these strengths of women as being spiritual or moral in character. Believing as I do that spiritual things are the most important things, I simply cannot respect an equality that does not include moral or spiritual equality. If women are so good, and men are so bad, it certainly looked like a meaningless type of equality to me.

I looked further through the Bahá'í writings, and saw much authority for the spiritual and moral equality of men and women. Our understanding of a part of the Bahá'í writings is limited by our understanding of the whole of the writings. The microcosm can only be known through the macrocosm, and probably vice versa. So these quotes from 'Abdu'l-Bahá must be read subject to the rest of the Bahá'í writings. The particular writings that I have in mind here are those on the Oneness of Humanity. Shoghi Effendi has declared this teaching to be Bahá'u'lláh's 'supreme declaration'[33], 'the chief and distinguishing feature of the Faith He proclaimed,'[34] and 'the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve.'[35] 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself calls the Oneness of Humanity the 'one central theme'[36] of Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation, as well as 'the foundation of the Faith of God and the distinguishing feature of His law.'[37]

What are the ramifications of this fundamental principle?

I consider this part of The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh to provide valuable guidance in the application of this teaching:

O CHILDREN OF MEN!

Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other.[38]

And 'Abdu'l-Bahá said this:

...[W]e must not make distinctions between individual members of the human family. We must not consider any soul as barren or deprived.[39]

And more specifically on the topic of gender equality, He said this:

[F]or man and woman are equally the recipients of powers and endowments from

God, the Creator. God has not ordained distinction between them in His consummate purpose.[40]

[F]rom the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between [men and women].[41]

It would seem that despite all of women's strengths and men's weaknesses, spiritual equality exists and that is that.

I tried to understand this seemingly contradictory state of affairs in a different way.

One explanation for the Lioness quote can be found in the following statement by

'Abdu'l-Bahá:

[W]e must declare that her capacity is equal, even greater than man's. This will inspire her with hope and ambition, and her susceptibilities for advancement will continually increase. She must not be told and taught that she is weaker and inferior in capacity and qualification. If a pupil is told that his intelligence is less than his fellow pupils, it is a very great drawback and handicap to his progress. He must be encouraged to advance by the statement, 'You are most capable, and if you endeavour, you will attain the highest degree.'[42]

One can view the Lioness quote as an example of such encouragement from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to women. This explanation is especially valid if one considers the status of women in the pre-first world war period of the twentieth century. Although the suffragette movement had succeeded in some Western countries, the struggle was still on in others. It was very much in the early days of the feminist movement, and was not all that removed from the Victorian era where the opinion of women's value and usefulness as productive human beings was at a very low level.[43] The women to whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá was speaking would have particularly needed this encouragement, to show that they really could make a difference in the world. This could even be seen as an early example of affirmative action.

Looking at the context of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements, it is possible to see why 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not say much about the good qualities of men. This

approach gives two different but not inconsistent explanations. One explanation is that it may have been because in the early twentieth century, most men and women thought that these things were so self-evident that they didn't need mentioning. This is unfortunate because a lot of the things that have traditionally been viewed as men's strengths may actually be weaknesses now or have become obsolete.

The Lioness quote and others like it by 'Abdu'l-Bahá mention certain strengths of women. In the Bahá'í view of gender, where 'equality of status does not mean identity of function'[44], it is entirely possible for women in general to be better at certain things than men in general. In fact, the Universal House of Justice has stated that this is in fact so.[45]

The exact areas of these differences are unclear, although it would appear that areas where men and women in general have similar abilities are far, far greater.

One ramification of all this is, if men and women really are equal, and that if women have certain strengths in some areas, it must follow that men have a proportionate amount of strengths in other areas. And I am talking about true spiritual and moral strengths - not being aggressive or better able to kill. I do not want to speculate on what exactly these things might be. It may be that we don't even have names or concepts for some of these things yet. It may be that men have an undeveloped potential in areas in which it has been assumed that women are superior. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke about the relative strengths of men and women, He was speaking in the early twentieth century. These things may change as other things change.

In fact it would seem that we can expect some kind of change. Bahá'u'lláh has written that a 'race of men, incomparable in character, shall be raised up.'[46] Although I think that the primary meaning of this term concerns people in general, it may be that the term has a secondary meaning which is especially about men. There are numerous examples in Kitáb-i-Iqán of words in sacred texts having multiple meanings[47], and Bahá'u'lláh has written elsewhere:

Know assuredly that just as thou firmly believest the Word of God, exalted be His glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted.[48]

One way of finding out what this change might be like is to look at Bahá'í laws, which Shoghi Effendi has described as 'the Charter of the future world civilization.'[49] On chastity, Bahá'u'lláh has written, 'And if he met the fairest and most comely of women, he would not feel his heart seduced by the least shadow of desire for her beauty.'[50] This is the standard that we have to aspire to. It is difficult to see how this standard could ever be approached unless it is accompanied by a fundamental change in consciousness. This is but one small example of what the 'new race of men' might be like, a new race that will gradually grow out of the old race.

I shall conclude by discussing another quotation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's, one that has been the main inspiration for my views in this area:

As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.[51]

There should be a balance between men and women. Neither sex should be viewed as more or less important, and neither sex should be able to wield power over the other. In the past there has been no such balance. Patriarchy has existed, and men have been able to suppress the development of women and devalue the feminine. But the suppression of the feminine is only one half of the effects of this imbalance. The flip-side is that the masculine has been corrupted because men have had power which they should not have had. This imbalance between men and women still exists, although it is often less visible. Therefore we need to work together to restore the balance, women pulling from their end, men pushing from their end. It's not going to be easy, but it has to be done. Only to the extent that the balance is restored will men be able to ease their own inner pain and discover a masculinity that is moral, spiritual, life-giving, life-affirming, pure, and in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's wondrous vision.

Notes

1. Vicky Randall, *Women and Politics*, (London: Macmillan, 1982) pp. 1-7.
2. Sandra Berns, "Through the Looking Glass: Gender, Class and Shared Interests" (1993) 11 *Law in Context* 95 at 97-8.
3. Bahá'í compilation, *Teaching the Bahá'í Faith*, (Mona Vale: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1995) paragraphs 18, 32, 45; pp. 28-9, 36, 43.
4. *Teaching the Bahá'í Faith* para. 346, p. 177.
5. Sandra Berns, p. 99-100.
6. Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, (London: Arrow Books, 1987) pp. 150-3; Berns p. 99.
7. Ruth Colker, *Feminism, Theology and Abortion*, (77) 5 *California Law Review* (1989); Isabel Karpin, *Reimagining Maternal Selfhood: Transgressing Body Boundaries and the Law* [1994] 2 *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 36.
8. Graycar and Morgan, pp. 41-2; Catherine MacKinnon, *Reflections on Sex Equality under Law*, 100 *Yale Law Journal* 1281 (1991) at 1296.
9. Bah'yyih Nakhjavani, *Asking Questions: A Challenge to Fundamentalism*, (Oxford: George Ronald, 1990) p. 166.
10. Nakhjavani, p. 168.
11. Here are but four examples: Hoda Mahmoudi, "The Role of Men in Establishing the Equality of Women", and Michael Penn "Violence Against Women and Girls", *World Order* (Spring 1995); Shiva Tavana, "Sexual Equality in the Bahá'í Community" 3 *dialogue* 28-31 [1986]; Safoura Chittleborough, "Requisites for Family Unity", *Proceedings of the National Bahá'í Studies Conference* Hobart July 1994, (Sydney: Association for Bahá'í Studies - Australia, 1995) p. 11.
12. This term was coined by Arlie Hochschild in *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*, (New York City: Viking, 1989).
13. Marion Tapper, "Can a Feminist be a Liberal?" (1986) 64 *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 37 at 40-1; MacKinnon, pp.

1281-1296.

14. One aspect of this will be explored in the second part of this paper.

15. Ruth Colker, *Abortion & Dialogue* 63 *Tulane Law Review* 1363 (1989).

16. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) p. 305.

17. Two examples of this are: Tavana, 28-31; Penny Caton (ed.), *Equal Circles*, (Kalimat Press, 1987).

18. Before proceeding, I would like to acknowledge some of the contributions that other authors have made in this field (with apologies to those whom I may have omitted): Sidney Morrison, "Becoming a Man" in *Equal Circles*; Hossain Danesh, "Bahá'í Scholarship", in *Bahá'í Scholarship: Proceedings of the First Annual Conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies - Japan*, pp. 52, 56-7; Mahmoudi; Chittleborough.

19. Steve Biddulph, *Manhood*, (Sydney: Finch Publishing, 1994) p. 6. Biddulph's emphasis.

20. Bahá'í compilation, *Women*, (Haifa: Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, 1986) paragraph 25.

21. *Women*, paragraph 85.

22. *Women*, paragraph 21.

23. *Women*, paragraph 21.

24. *Women*, paragraph 21.

25. *Women*, paragraph 23.

26. *Women*, paragraph 23.

27. *Women*, paragraph 25.

28. *Women*, paragraph 25.

29. *Women*, paragraph 85.

30. *Women*, paragraph 85.

31. *Women*, paragraph 85.

32. *Women*, paragraph 88.

33. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) p. 36.

34. The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 36.
35. The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 42.
36. The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 36.
37. The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 36.
38. Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985) p. 20.
39. Women, paragraph 104.
40. Women, paragraph 108.
41. Women, paragraph 12.
42. Women, paragraph 85.
43. Sandra Berns, "Women in English Legal History: Subject (Almost), Object (Irrevocably), Person (Not Quite)", (1993) 12 University of Tasmania Law Review 26.
44. Women, paragraph 64.
45. Women, paragraph 30.
46. Bahá'u'lláh quoted in Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) p. 26.
47. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Iqan, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1950) pp. 33-43.
48. Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p.175.
49. Shoghi Effendi quoted in Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) p. 13.
50. Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p.118.
51. Women, paragraph 20.

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