

*** WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

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Statement to the 36th session of the Commission on the Status of Women
Priority Theme: Development

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The Baha'i International Community is pleased to take this opportunity to address the role of women in development, particularly the crucial role women will play -- in partnership with men -- in creating and implementing a sustainable pattern of development.

The concept of sustainable development itself has emerged largely in response to a growing disillusionment with the prevalent development models and an increasing collaboration among three great forward-looking movements -- peace, the environment and women's emancipation. A crucial element common to all three movements is the significant role played by women. For decades, development planners neglected the needs of women, paid scant attention to the deterioration of the environment, and failed to discern the connection between development and peace. As a result, development failed. The convergence of these movements has amplified women's voices and strengthened their call for a sustainable future for their children and their children's children. As women help to redefine development, planners are beginning to take a more holistic approach.

One way in which women are redefining development is by undertaking their own projects. The recent (1991) Global Assembly of Women and the Environment, sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) highlighted an incredible diversity of such projects. UNEP invited representatives of both governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to Miami, Florida, to confer with 215 women who have initiated successful environment projects in communities all over the world. These women, many of them faced daily with the responsibility for feeding and protecting the health of their families, took action within the spheres of influence traditionally open to women. They designed smokeless stoves, solar cookers and solar greenhouses, cleaned up local water supplies, altered farming methods, and successfully cultivated degraded lands given up for lost. Others influenced policy and decision-making in realms not usually considered the province of women. They reformed local and national sewer systems, recycled highly toxic used motor oil, and obliged powerful industrial concerns to reduce scandalously high levels of lead and cadmium emissions. These projects -- some carried out at the grass roots by ordinary citizens, others initiated at the highest levels -- offer affordable,

repeatable, and sustainable solutions to problems common throughout the world.

Women are also redefining development through their work with non-governmental organizations. Immediately after the UNEP-sponsored, Global Assembly of Women and the Environment, NGOs sponsored the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, also in Miami. Over 1,500 women and men from more than 75 countries, both individuals and representatives of a broad range of NGOs, heard testimony and engaged in a spirited exchange of views on a variety of environment-related topics. The Declaration at the close of the Congress offered three guiding principles for inclusion in the proposed "Earth Charter": (1) global equity, giving priority to meeting the basic human needs of all people; (2) resource ethics, calling for sustainable use of natural resources and responsibility toward future generations; and (3) empowerment of women at all levels to contribute to the achievement of the principles of equity, social justice and ethics.

The world is in desperate need of the ingenuity, good sense, determination, and compassion exhibited by the women selected by UNEP. As evidence of the failure of current development strategies mounts, it is becoming increasingly obvious that women's talents and capacities are being under-utilized. Imagine the benefits that could accrue to families, communities and the world if women were educated and fully involved in decision making and policy making at every level of society.

Full participation by both women and men is a goal of Baha'i development. The New Era Development Institute, a Baha'i institution in Panchgani, India, conducts an extensive regional development program. While the Institute conducts some programs aimed mainly at women, it would be misleading to assume that other activities do not incorporate women-related issues in their planning or implementation. The concept of women, their empowerment and development, is an intrinsic element in the goals and all operational objectives of the Institute. The Institute adopts an integrated approach, not a vertical or compartmentalized approach, to its activities and hence ensures that the development and training needs of women are systematically fused into all training and field application processes. This goes for all programs: health education, afforestation, adult literacy, rural technology, animal husbandry, and rural schools.

This inclusive, integrated approach to development derives from the conviction that no development effort will succeed without unity. In the words of Baha'u'llah, the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, over one hundred years ago: "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established." Guided by this principle, Baha'i communities have evolved an approach to development which is unifying, participatory, sustainable, and replicable. Beginning with a shared vision for the future, Baha'i development projects seek practical ways to implement the principles that will bring about willing co-operation among the nations, races, creeds and classes of the human family.

Whatever the specific differences among successful Baha'i projects, all rely on the same methodology. Simply put, successful Baha'i projects are grounded in spiritual principle; they use consultation at every stage to ensure full participation by the local community and relevance to local needs; and they rely on local consultative decision-making bodies for support, thereby strengthening the community's institutional capacity to sustain development activities. An examination of one Baha'i project, currently underway in Malaysia, Bolivia, Nigeria, and Cameroon, will illustrate how this methodology works. The Traditional Media as Change Agent Project is an experimental communication project, funded by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and aimed at changing the community's perception of women. The project grew out of an idea offered to this Commission in 1988 by the Baha'i International Community: that sustainable improvements in the status of women require acceptance of the principle of equality by both men and women. Implementing this principle in a society that has traditionally insisted that women are to be seen and not heard is not easy. It requires a shift in values from exterior beauty to beauty from within: substance, character, personality, how one carries oneself. Women must be aware of their rights and their capabilities and must desire to improve themselves and realize their potential. However, there is little women can do without the support of men. Therefore, men must be given the opportunity to realize for themselves that giving opportunities to women does not mean that they will be deprived.

This project chose to stimulate consultation about the principle of equality through traditional media. Folk media belong to the people themselves, not outsiders or professionals. Because folk media are often interactive, they can engage both the literate and the non-literate in redefining village and community priorities. In order to ensure that true consultation ensues from the folk media presentations, the community is taught how to consult -- to define the problem, to gather the facts, to identify relevant principles, and to explore together, with open minds and hearts, how to apply those principles. Baha'i communities have a built-in cultural and social elasticity, which project planners believe can be stimulated in favor of women when the status of women is consulted upon in a rational, non-threatening manner.

Community consultation at every stage of the project infuses harmony into the change process. Once the community has discussed the pace and direction of change, they can then discuss development support to buttress those changes. In other words, first comes the recognition that women's lot is not a good one, then some recognition of the arenas in which it could be improved, and finally some specific recommendations that can be translated into projects. The project might falter at this point without a structure to rely on.

Both the national and local Baha'i communities involved in this project volunteered to participate and committed resources in advance. Local communities were selected on the basis of the strength and maturity of their local governing councils and the local council's commitment to raising and enhancing the status of women. These consultative decision-making bodies become

the means by which the community institutionalizes its development efforts. Supplemental training will be provided where necessary to carry out the project.

Partnership calls for changes by both women and men. Women need to develop their own capacities and step forward to play an active role in solving the world's problems. Men, for their part, must learn to cooperate with women and encourage their efforts. When men actively promote the principle of equality, women will no longer have to struggle for their rights. Gradually, Baha'is believe, both women and men will discard long-held unhealthy attitudes and progressively incorporate into their lives the values conducive to true unity, without which an environmentally sustainable civilization will be impossible.

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