

EXPLORING MALE OPPRESSION FROM A FAMILY-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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Although one can understand the author's view that both men and women are oppressed under the present social system, it is not possible to accept the suggestion that male oppression is the root cause of the inequality between women and men. In the second paragraph of the article, the author makes the statement that "present-day people did not create the current system, so blaming them is not useful . . ." (48). Therefore, we are led to assume that men have little or no concern or responsibility toward the achievement of gender equality since they have not contributed to the "current system." What I find disturbing about this assumption is that one could extend the same argument to racism. That is, this generation has not created the current system of racism; therefore, no one should be blamed or accept the blame for racism. Of course, the danger of this kind of presumption is that it ignores individual, societal, and, more importantly, spiritual responsibility. In fact, such an assumption also ignores the most important aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in terms of the achievement of individual and societal transformation.

More specifically, 'Abdu'l-Bahá admonishes men to take an active role toward the elimination of sexism, saying that "when men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights!"¹ This statement does not imply that women do not have an equally important role to play in bringing about gender equality. But certainly it is the men who have ruled within the social system, and this is where the change toward equality must take place. Regarding the responsibility of men and the changes necessary, the following statements by 'Abdu'l-Bahá are illuminating:

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind.²

. . . imbued with the same virtues as man, rising through all the degrees of human attainment, women will become the peers of men, and until this equality is established, true progress and attainment for the human race will not be facilitated.

. . . Therefore, as woman advances toward the degree of man in power and privilege,

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*, 11th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 163.

2. Quoted in J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, 5th ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) 149.

with the right of vote and control in human government, most assuredly war will cease; for woman is naturally the most devoted and staunch advocate of international peace.³

The above quotations, which are only a sample, imply that currently men, as a group, are the ones with power, privilege, opportunity, and control. Therefore, there is a clear directive that requires of men the application of spiritual principles—both on a personal and on a societal level—toward the achievement of gender equality.

Furthermore, the article does not address the obvious inequality that women of today are experiencing at all levels of society, an inequality that *can* be remedied by those in positions of power and influence. Those who predominantly hold such positions and have the power to motivate change throughout the world are the men. A few examples regarding the status and oppression of women in the United States should suffice. The average working woman's salary over the past twenty years continues to be far less than the average for men (about 60 cents for every one dollar that a man earns). Over eighty percent of full-time working women earn less than \$20,000 a year. According to Susan Faludi, this number is nearly double the male rate.⁴ Women with a college degree continue to earn less than do men with a high-school diploma. Of all the federal and state judges, only eight percent are women. Only six percent of all law partners are women. Of all the corporate managers, only one-half of one percent are women. There are currently two female United States senators, and three state governors. Of the Fortune 500 companies, only two chief executives are women. Over ninety-nine percent of private employers do not provide child care. Women attending college receive seventy percent of the aid that undergraduate men receive in grants and work-study positions. In the 1980s, according to Faludi, about half of all homeless women (the fastest growing segment of the homeless) were runaways from domestic violence. Domestic violence has been on the increase since the 1980s, with wife battering as the leading cause of injury to women.

The statistics from other nations, in particular the Third World, regarding the status of women and their absolute lack of basic human rights are equally grim. The following examples are representative:

- In Colombia during 1982, the Forensic Institute of Bogota found that of 1,170 cases of bodily injuries, one in five was due to conjugal violence—and ninety-four percent of those hospitalized were battered women.
- India had approximately 1,000 registered cases of dowry deaths in 1985, 1,319 in 1986, and 1,786 in 1987.

3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2d ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 375.

4. Susan Faludi, *Backlash* (New York: Crown, 1991).

- Of the 153 Kuwaiti women asked if they had ever been assaulted, one-third answered that they had. Asked if they knew of friends or relatives who had been victims of such violence, eighty percent responded affirmatively.
- In Thailand, twenty-five percent of the malnourished children at a Bangkok rehabilitation center treated during the first half of 1985 were from families where the mother was regularly beaten by her spouse. More than fifty percent of married women from Bangkok's biggest slum and construction sites were regularly beaten by their husbands.⁵

It seems to me that the data are quite conclusive, indicating that women have not achieved nearly the level of equality that the Bahá'í Revelation advances.

Rather than going into a more detailed description of other incongruencies that appear in the article, I would like to mention just one other important point. On page 53, the author begins a listing of solutions she identifies as necessary to achieve gender equality. What is troublesome about the first solution ("to recognize that the problem of inequality is multifaceted" not "villain/victim") is that it ignores the significant, grave issue of violence against women (which is on the rise throughout the world) and the lack of human rights for women, not to mention the other inequalities noted above. The question I wish to ask is, What is the responsibility that men must shoulder in the elimination of these grievous social ills? Since men are the primary perpetrators of these acts of violence and injustice, should they not take a more aggressive role toward their elimination?

As to the second solution, it does not offer any practical guidelines as to how both sexes can be "helped" to overcome their so-called oppression. What is most distressing about this matter is that none of the Bahá'í principles—such as, how to bring about equality in the home and society, how to use consultation so as not to dominate others, what it means to create an environment in which women enjoy equal access and opportunity at all levels of society, how to bring about unity in diversity by learning how to listen to the voices of women and allow them equal participation in all spheres of life—are discussed as solutions to this problem.

As to the third and last solution regarding the differences between men and women, the author simply states this to be a fact but does not explain its importance. In the compilation of Bahá'í writings on women,⁶ numerous quotations address gender differences and their importance in bringing about equality between the sexes. All of these quotations point to one important consequence: until the equality of women and men is realized, society will not reach its highest potential. The following are some quotations that address the

5. All statistics taken from United Nations survey on domestic violence in thirty-six countries, 1991.

6. *Women: Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (Thornhill, ON: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1986).

issue of gender differences (not solely biological differences) and why women must achieve equality:

They will prove that in this cycle women are equal to men, nay in certain respects they will excel.⁷

In some respects, women have astonishing capacities; they hasten in their attraction to God, and are intense in their fiery ardour for Him.⁸

In this day the duty of everyone, whether man or woman, is to teach the Cause. In America, the women have outdone the men in this regard and have taken the lead in this field. They strive harder in guiding the peoples of the world, and their endeavours are greater.⁹

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.¹⁰

Therefore, strive to show in the human world that women are most capable and efficient, that their hearts are more tender and susceptible than the hearts of men, that they are more philanthropic and responsive toward the needy and suffering, that they are inflexibly opposed to war and are lovers of peace. . . . for man is more inclined to war than woman, and a real evidence of woman's superiority will be her service and efficiency in the establishment of universal peace.¹¹

You are quite right in stating that men and women have basic and distinct qualities. The solution provided in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is not . . . for men to become women, and for women to become men.¹²

It may be helpful to stress . . . that the Bahá'í principle of the equality of men and women is clearly stated in the teachings, and the fact that there is diversity of function between them in certain areas does not negate this principle.¹³

. . . they may be even superior to the men, versed in sciences and yet detached, so that the whole world may bear witness to the fact that men and women have absolutely the same rights.¹⁴

7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *Women* 48.

8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *Women* 50.

9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *Women* 50.

10. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 102-3; cited in *Women* 40.

11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 284; cited in *Women* 39.

12. Universal House of Justice, cited in *Women* 16.

13. Universal House of Justice, cited in *Women* 16.

14. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy*, comp. Isobel F. Chamberlain (Boston: The Tudor Press, 1917) 83; cited in *Women* 13.

... and as regards tenderness of heart and the abundance of mercy and sympathy ye are superior.¹⁵

In some respects woman is superior to man. She is more tender-hearted, more receptive, her intuition is more intense.¹⁶

To achieve equality between women and men, we must begin to analyze seriously the practical steps toward its implementation. That is, how do we begin within the family to free the husband and wife of the stereotypic roles (practiced for centuries) that continue to perpetuate inequality? Should the mother do all the work of rearing the children and the housework at the cost of not pursuing either a career or other interests? Or does it mean that husbands must also share in the domestic role regardless of whether they are the sole "breadwinner" or not? What does it mean to be in a marriage where both partners enjoy full equality? How does Bahá'u'lláh define our spiritual responsibility to one another in this context? Likewise, at work what does it mean to have women at equal levels with men? How do we then begin to take practical steps to achieve these important goals as given to humanity by Bahá'u'lláh? It seems to me that rather than speaking about male oppression, which is a difficult concept to accept given the patterns in today's society, this article could have addressed the more critical matter of how to accomplish the principle of full equality between women and men in our daily lives.

Finally, it is true that through socialization we internalize our family norms. It is also true that sometimes we come from families where we have experienced some form of abuse and oppression. However, except for the extreme or pathological cases of abuse and oppression, we are not all "victims" or prisoners of our familial milieu. Again, this is where our faith in Bahá'u'lláh and his limitless Revelation must be systematically understood and methodically internalized to bring about the transformational change necessary to spiritualize society and bring Bahá'u'lláh's principles to everyday life.

Victimization often implies that an outward force, such as the family or society, is responsible for the individual's behavior. Bahá'u'lláh's injunction is that regardless of our background and experiences, if we open our hearts and minds to his Revelation, if we take the daily steps toward our own spiritualization, we can bring about a total spiritual transformation, not only of the self but also of society and, ultimately, the world. It is in this area of personal spiritual change (where the motivation for this change is Bahá'u'lláh) that the article seems to fail to offer any understanding or solutions. That is, we cannot simply imply that since men are oppressed, they therefore do not need to

15. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 184; cited in *Women* 12.

16. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 161; cited in *Women* 11.

concern themselves too seriously with the implementation of the equality between the sexes. It is precisely because men come out of a system that oppresses women that men must take full responsibility toward a spiritual change not only in their own behavior but also in the shift that must take place at all levels of society.

HODA MAHMOUDI

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON "EXPLORING MALE OPPRESSION FROM A FAMILY-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE"**Commentator:** Hoda Mahmoudi**Published:** *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 4.3 (1991): 75–80

Dr. Hoda Mahmoudi writes that I suggested male oppression is the root cause of the inequality between women and men. This, however, was not my suggestion. Instead, I carefully and explicitly framed male oppression as one side of a coin—the coin being that both sexes are oppressed by our current societal system although in different ways. My key point is that harmful degradation of one sex, the female sex in our culture, is associated with different, harmful, and limiting expectations of men. The expectations may vary for each sex, but both suffer (albeit differently) because each sex loses a part of his or her respective humanity.

It is true that I discussed how present-day people did not create the current system and proposed that blaming them is not useful. In my opinion a blaming attitude leads to a kind of hostility and resentment that interferes with change. However, I did not state (and in no way wished to convey the idea) that because present-day men are not to blame they have no responsibility for achieving gender equality. I regret that the lack of clarity in my writing could lead someone to interpret my article as supporting lack of responsibility on the part of either sex. My article would indeed have been strengthened by including some of the quotations Mahmoudi cited in her commentary that supported men's taking an active role toward the elimination of sexism. My article argues for each sex's taking responsibility for understanding the other's psychological dilemmas. If men are going to be different in our society, they need to be strongly reinforced when they begin to change. A man needs support for his efforts to become more nurturing, just as a woman needs support for her efforts to become educationally accomplished.

Mahmoudi criticizes my article for not addressing the "obvious inequality that women of today are experiencing at all levels of society. . ." (76). This criticism is unwarranted. I wrote about the inequality of salary, the lack of protection against violence in the home, discrimination in the workplace, and the pervasive use of women as sex objects. I acknowledge that my paragraph on page 50 is not as statistically precise and therefore not as powerfully convincing as Mahmoudi's exploration of this issue.

The first solution to the problem of sexual inequality I proposed was for people to recognize that the problem of inequality is multifaceted. I am not ignoring the "grave issue of violence against women" (77) as Mahmoudi proposed. Rather, I am trying to go beyond the statistics Mahmoudi cited to understand how men are socialized so they are capable of committing violent acts against women. Males do not emerge from the womb as wife beaters. Something happens to some men in their social development so they become

capable of abuse. I am profoundly disturbed by violence between men and women. The issue for me arouses a fear of men and an anger that has made me feel prejudiced against half of the world's population. It was my concern with my own anger and prejudice that motivated me to try to improve my understanding of the socialization process men face. Because I have tried to understand the socialization process that contributes to violence against women does not mean that I am ignoring the gravity of violence against women. Let me firmly state that I do not condone violence, and I think that men should take a significant role in eliminating violence. I also think that extensive protective and recovery services for victims of violence need to be in place. However, I also think that batterers require extensive services.

I agree with Mahmoudi that my second solution regarding helping both sexes is short on practical guidelines. I recognize that this section is a weak area of my article. I hope to complete further study addressing how Bahá'í principles can be implemented to foster the equality of men and women. However, whatever guidelines or suggestions either I or other interested researchers develop, they must address both sides of the coin. It is not enough to help just one sex.

I am confused by Mahmoudi's comment that I state there are differences between men and women but do not explain their importance. I did not cite quotations discussing these differences primarily because I assumed these differences were familiar to readers of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. However, immediately after acknowledging that there are differences, on page 54 of my article, I cited two quotations from the Bahá'í writings that explain why establishing the equality of men and women is so important. These quotations connect establishing gender equality with the "happiness of the human world"¹ and the creation of a "moral and psychological climate. . . in which international peace can emerge."² I also addressed the more personal result of individual psychological peace. Finally, I closed my article with a quotation that clearly suggests men's development is limited because females are not permitted to develop fully: "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."³

I agree wholeheartedly with Mahmoudi that "we must begin to analyze seriously the practical steps toward. . . implementation" (79) of the equality of men and women. Since the Bahá'í community is trying to establish a principle not yet in practice in our society, the task is significant. I know I did not cite a series of explicit, practical proposals regarding implementation. Once again, I acknowledge that this is a weakness of my article. However, I consider my

1. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2d ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 134.

2. Universal House of Justice, "To the Peoples: A Bahá'í Statement on Peace" *Bahá'í Studies* 14 (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1986) 13.

3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 11th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 133.

article to have been a contribution to the issue of implementation, although perhaps a subtle one. I addressed the issue of how men are also oppressed by our current system because it has direct implications for the attitude with which we approach those practical steps. In my opinion, it is going to be difficult for men to change if they are construed as the “bad guys” who should be punished for centuries of inequality. Like any human making important changes, men need understanding, encouragement, and support—not overt or covert criticism. I discussed in my article the challenge men often face when they step outside their traditional role. They are likely to be called “wimps,” to have their masculinity and sexual orientation questioned, and to be the object of social derision.

If we know how some men are socialized so that violence against another human is a practised method of resolving conflict, we will then understand how to alter such socialization so that men learn more peaceful and consultative skills and become more integrated psychologically. For example, parents will need to allow male children to cry as much as most female children are allowed to cry. My comments may seem rather limited, but I have heard parents in my clinical practice talk about their ambivalent feelings when they see their sons cry. On the one hand, they know that it is healthy and celebrate their child's capacity to express himself. On the other hand, they think about what will happen to their son when he cries in public and faces possible social ostracism. They wonder if they should “prepare” him for the harshness of the world.

I did not write, as Mahmoudi suggests, that humans are “victims” of their family milieu. What I did discuss was the importance of the internalization process. Internalization is a process by which concrete interactions in the family are mapped into the psyche and carried by the child (and subsequently the adult) into the community beyond the family. Internalization operates whether you are in a healthy family, a somewhat healthy family, or an extremely pathological family. Just as pathological interactions can be internalized, so can healthy, nurturing, and consultative interactions. Since many factors have an impact on internalization, just because one is reared in a dysfunctional family does not mean one is doomed in some robotic fashion to duplicate precisely the family's functioning. Other interactions such as with a teacher, a coach, another family down the block, or extended family members are also internalized. These interactions may be healthier than those within the family of origin and therefore ameliorate the impact of being reared in that family. This interaction suggests how important the Bahá'í community is for society as a whole. The community can offer alternative models to those available in many areas of our society.

Internalization in adult life is much slower than internalization in childhood. Any adult who has entered therapy to address psychological problems knows how hard it is to change early patterns. As Mahmoudi suggests, this process can be facilitated by a soul opening his or her heart and mind to the regenerating influence of Bahá'u'lláh's message. I agree with Mahmoudi that I did not

explicitly address this area of personal spiritual change where the motivation for change is Bahá'u'lláh. This is a comprehensive and crucial topic, but it was not the primary purpose of my article. However, after reviewing Mahmoudi's ideas together with my own, I do think I am implicitly suggesting that the spiritual quality of compassion for both men and women is needed as the Bahá'í community and the larger society struggle to implement gender equality.

I do not consider the ideas in my article to be a comprehensive explanation for the inequality between men and women. I intended to contribute an additional perspective to current discussions. Specifically, I wanted to integrate contributions from family-systems theory and to raise awareness that men face a socialization process which limits them, has oppressive features, and directly relates to how they subsequently treat women. To establish the principle of the equality of men and women fully, men's dilemmas also need to be understood along with women's difficulties. The psychological qualities that men need to develop are different from those attributes and skills that women need to develop. Both sexes need to be supported in their efforts to change. Assisting, understanding, and supporting only one sex will hamper process toward attaining gender equality.

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