

**RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON "THE EQUALITY OF WOMEN:
THE BAHÁ'Í PRINCIPLE OF COMPLEMENTARITY"**

Commentator: Linda O'Neil

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Linda O'Neil states that women and men are called upon to share the same roles and responsibilities. I agree; however, motherhood is a special case for women, as is serving on the Universal House of Justice for men. Many of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings (for example, see *Bahá'í Education: A Compilation* 46-50) clearly stress the special role of mothers regarding their children. As O'Neil further argues, this special role is not absolute, but definitely preferable.

O'Neil's choice of the quotation implying that a mother's duty can be finished in "days or months" leaves much to be desired. Further reading in the compilation on education (page 67 for example) shows the period of young childhood to be much longer than that. From the strictly biological point of view, one must see the importance of the nursing relationship between mother and child. This link, when allowed to proceed naturally, often lasts several years, not days or months. It is quite true that this intense period of mothering does not necessarily occupy a woman's entire life, but, if a couple decides to have several children and to allow time between each one (often a natural by-product of an extended nursing relationship), this period may easily extend ten years and beyond.

I disagree with the implication that childrearing and homemaking do not count as "an occupation which will be of benefit to mankind" (*Women* 33), for the Universal House of Justice states very clearly the opposite opinion (*Women* 33). Instead of merely stressing the holiness of paid occupation, why not also stress the holy undertaking of childrearing? "Wherefore, O ye loving mothers, know ye that in God's sight, the best of all ways to worship Him is to educate the children and train them in all the perfections of humankind; and no nobler deed than this can be imagined . . ." (*Bahá'í Education* 49). Obviously, a mother can do this better if she has more than busy evenings and weekends with her young children.

In the political arena, I am told that what I want as a mother is free daycare for my newborn baby so I can be "liberated" to work outside the home as much as my husband. I hope our Bahá'í vision of equality can go beyond the concept of career. I believe that what any mother—who was reasonably nurtured herself as a child and has a loving and supportive husband—would really like is the opportunity to nurse, love, and rear her children herself, with an extended maternity leave to permit her to return to her other job when the children are ready and on a schedule that would allow her still to have time for the family. What do men want? I believe they would like time to be more involved with

their children, too. And what about the children? Who takes their needs and desires into account?

Women need support from society for their role as mothers. Everyone with personal experience must agree that a home with young children and both parents working full-time is not the optimal setting for fostering family growth and unity. Obviously, a reduced work week for both parents would greatly improve the quality of family life, especially when, as Bahá'ís, we want to allow for a spiritual dimension in our children's development. At the present time, however, with forty-hour (or more) work weeks, many families who are more concerned about family than individual rights may find that having one full-time wage-earner outside the home is all the family unit can tolerate. This is not the ideal situation. The woman has "sacrificed" some of her outside career potential more than the man, so as not to "sacrifice" developing her relationship with her child. I think we need to accept, even while stressing equality among the sexes, that at this time, this type of family setting (one full-time wage-earner) can also foster equality and growth.

Yet as Bahá'ís, we often fail to offer adequate support to women and families in this situation. (It was in this light that the journal *Spiritual Mothering* was started by Bahá'í mothers in 1980.) Bahá'ís are proud to show the world our "successful women Bahá'ís"—which of course means career success—as examples of our commitment to equality. Some of us feel little is being said on the subject of those women who choose to invest large amounts of their time and energy into their families at the expense of their careers, and little is done to prepare potential mothers to see the special beauty in motherhood and to deal with the changes in their roles that rearing children brings.

As Bahá'ís, our challenge is to understand the concept of "equality of the sexes" in the light of very clear statements by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that the mother has a unique role in rearing her children. Janet Huggins's recent article (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 3.2) about male-female relationships in a family system would seem a step in the right direction. We need to address the equality issue in a family context, where each family member's rights are equally respected.

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