

From Oppression to Equality The Emergence of the Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the Bahá'í principle of the equality between women and men. It provides a historical survey of the obstructions and prejudiced attitudes and behavior toward women as promoted by religious institutions, leading philosophers and intellectual and patriarchal social systems. Reasons for the current strain and lack of communication between women and men are presented and discussed. The convergence between the Bahá'í concept of equality and the current feminist perspective is developed. The question of what it means to be a liberated woman is pursued in relation to the Bahá'í writings and current feminist thought and theory in the areas of morality, rationality, and science. It is argued that the feminist model as well as the Bahá'í guidelines toward the achievement of equality are both imperative in bringing about a balanced and just global social system. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the necessary steps to bring about the type of social change for the attainment of full equality between the sexes.

Résumé

Cet article analyse le principe bahá'í de l'égalité des femmes et des hommes. Il nous donne un aperçu historique des entraves ainsi que des attitudes et comportements dûs aux préjugés envers les femmes et promus aussi bien par les institutions religieuses et les philosophes proéminents que par les systèmes sociaux intellectuels et patriarcaux. Les raisons qui expliquent les tensions actuelles et le manque de communication entre les femmes et les hommes y sont présentées et discutées. La convergence entre le concept bahá'í d'égalité et la perspective féministe actuelle y est développée. La question de savoir ce que c'est qu'une femme libérée est examinée en relation avec les écrits bahá'ís et les idées et théories féministes actuelles dans les domaines de la moralité, la raison et la science. L'argumentation invoquée est que le modèle féministe aussi bien que les directives bahá'ís pour accomplir l'égalité sont tous deux impératifs pour l'établissement d'un système social global juste et équilibré. Enfin, l'article s'achève par une discussion des étapes nécessaires pour effectuer le genre de transformation sociale qui aboutira à la pleine égalité entre les sexes.

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza el principio bahá'í de la igualdad entre el hombre y la mujer. El mismo provee un estudio histórico de las obstrucciones y las actitudes prejuiciales y la conducta hacia la mujer como lo es promovido por las instituciones religiosas, líderes filosóficos e intelectuales y sistemas sociales patriarcales. Las razones para las actuales tensiones y la falta de comunicación entre el hombre y la mujer son presentados y discutidos. La convergencia entre el concepto bahá'í de la igualdad y la perspectiva actual del feminismo es desarrollado. La pregunta sobre lo que significa ser una mujer liberada es seguida en relación con las escrituras bahá'ís y los pensamientos y las teorías actuales del feminismo en el área de la moralidad, racionalidad, y la ciencia. Se discute que el modelo feminista, así como las guías bahá'ís hacia el logro de la igualdad, son ambos imperativos en traer un sistema social global balanceado y justo. Finalmente, el ensayo concluye con una discusión sobre los pasos necesarios para traer el tipo de cambio social para alcanzar completa igualdad entre los sexos.

Introduction

A fundamental precept of the Bahá'í Faith in pursuit of its objective of the unification of humankind is the attainment of full equality between women and men. The significance of this principle is explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the following statement:

Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible. (*Promulgation* 76)

The Bahá'í concept of equality asserts that women and men have been created in God's own image and manifest no spiritual distinction whatsoever. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very

important element. 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. (*Paris Talks* 133)

According to the Bahá'í writings, the inequality between the sexes is due primarily to the lack of opportunity and education which have been denied to women over the centuries.

It is significant that the Bahá'í religion is the first of all the major world religions to advance the principle of the absolute equality between women and men. In fact, the feminist movement is the only other social movement which has advocated equality between the sexes. Both movements began at about the same time (early 1800s) and aim at the social restructuring of human society whereby women will have full and equal opportunity to participate within all spheres of society including the political, industrial, economic, administrative, and scientific fields.

In this regard, an examination of the present global social system fails to provide a single example of a society in which the achievement of equality between women and men has been realized. On the contrary, the history of humankind is replete with demonstrations of the oppression and subjugation of women. The root causes of such oppression can be traced to the various ideologies and theories of social thought, religious doctrines, and cultural norms which have systematically denigrated and distorted the potential and status of women.

Therefore, to comprehend fully the complex issue of the equality between men and women, it is the objective of this paper to analyze the concept in terms of three major areas. The first is a review of the obstructions and prejudiced attitudes and behaviors that have historically prevented women from accomplishing full equality. Second, the paper discusses the possible convergence between the Bahá'í concept of equality and the feminist perspective, which provides a deeper understanding of the feminine character. Finally, an analysis is made of the nature of social change necessary to expedite the attainment of full equality between the sexes.

Impediments to Equality between the Sexes

The subjugation of women throughout human history has been expressed in a variety of ways. From among the works of the leading philosophers and intellectuals of both Eastern and Western civilizations one finds a strong bias in relation to the status and the capacities of women. As an example, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote:

We may thus conclude that it is a general law that there should be naturally ruling elements and elements naturally ruled... the rule of the freeman over the slave is one kind of rule; that of the male over the female another. (Qtd. in Deckard, *Women's Movement* 3)

Charles Darwin, the naturalist, said the following regarding the rational capacity of women:

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination or merely the use of the senses and hands. (Qtd. in Deckard, *Women's Movement* 3)

In his 1906 book, *Sex and Character*, the intellectual Otto Weininger wrote:

Women have no existence and no essence; they are nothing. Mankind occurs as male or female, as something or nothing.... She is neither moral nor antimoral; mathematically speaking, she has no sign; she is purposeless, neither good nor bad. But all existence is moral and logical. (Qtd. in Roszak)

The Spanish political philosopher, Juan Donoso Cortes, states the following regarding the feminine aspect of society:

When a nation shows a civilized horror of war, it receives directly the punishment of its mistake. God changes its sex, despoils it of its common mark of virility, changes it into a feminine nation, and sends conquerors to ravish it of its honor.

From among the writings of the major religions of the world, the status of women is consistently represented as being inferior to that of men. Confucius said:

The five worst infirmities that afflict the female are indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and silliness.... Such is the stupidity of woman's character, that it is incumbent upon her to distrust herself and to obey her husband. (Qtd. in Deckard, *Women's Movement* 9)

The Hindu Code of Manu (semi-legendary Hindu lawgiver) states:

In childhood a woman must be subject to her father; in youth to her husband; when her husband is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be free of subjugation. (Qtd. in Deckard, *Women's Movement* 9)

In the Orthodox Jewish text it is written:

Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, that I was not born a woman. (Qtd. in Deckard, *Women's Movement* 8)

The Christian scripture of St. Paul states:

Let women learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. (Qtd. in Deckard, *Women's Movement* 8)

And from the Islamic Qur'án:

Men are superior to women on account of the qualities in which God has given them pre-eminence. (Qtd. in Deckard, *Women's Movement* 8)

Such examples from religious writings and the works of intellectual thinkers have contributed to the present patriarchal, authoritarian, male-dominated society. The scholar Riane Eisler refers to this social system as a "dominator model of social organization: a social system in which male dominance, male violence, and a generally hierarchic and authoritarian social structure [are] the norm" (*Chalice* 45). Within this system, there are numerous cases of crimes of violence against women and general violations of women's rights (see Eisler, "Human Rights").

Some illustrations of acts of violence against women include the brutal practice of female infanticide, the mutilation and torture of millions of little girls and women through "female circumcision," and the dowry deaths in India where the bride is doused in gasoline and burned to death for failing to pay the groom a satisfactory after-the-marriage dowry. Regarding the acts of violence against women, anthropologists Divale and Harris found a direct relationship between warfare and female infanticide, thus concluding that the two are the most extreme forms of sexual inequality.

Riane Eisler, in her article entitled "Human Rights: The Unfinished Struggle," writes, "...in terms of social configurations or systems, there is a correlation between sexual inequality, a generally hierarchic and authoritarian social structure, and a high degree of social violence" (329). Other examples that support this finding include the conservative estimates in the United States which indicate that more than 82,000 women are raped annually and another four out of ten female workers are sexually harassed. Wife beating, although difficult to measure reliably, is reported to occur once every eighteen seconds in the United States and is widely practiced throughout the world (Shapiro, "Violence"). The National Institute of Mental Health has found that a quarter of all battered women were victims while pregnant (Steif, "Battered Wives" 76). Unfortunately, violence against women is generally viewed as a legitimate practice with discrepant support given legally or otherwise towards its elimination.

In terms of the education and development of women throughout the world, the trends and statistics also indicate gross inequities. In a report released by the United Nations, *The State of the World's Women 1985*, it is pointed out that women are responsible for

almost all the world's domestic work,... own hardly any land,... find it difficult to get loans and are overlooked by agricultural advisors and projects;... they are one-third of the world's official labor force, but are concentrated in the lowest-paid occupations and are more vulnerable to unemployment than men. (3)

The report further states that:

For the first time in history the eyes of the world have focussed on that half of the population who, by virtue of an accident of birth, perform two-thirds of the world's work, receive one-tenth of its income and own less than one-hundredth of its property. (3)

Due to their ascriptive status, women throughout the world appear to lack equal access educationally, economically, and politically. Furthermore, they do not enjoy equal protection under the law and in most

societies are treated as objects whose lives are subjected to violence and subordination.

The Bahá'í Concept of Equality and Current Feminist Perspective

The less than desirable status of women outlined thus far has contributed to the development of a communication gap and a disturbing strain between women and men. Deborah Tannen, a linguist, writes:

Male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication.... From the moment they're born, they're treated differently, talked to differently, and talk differently as a result.... These cultural differences include different expectations about the role of talk in relationships and how it fulfills that role. (*Conversational Style* 125)

Among surveys conducted on women in Western societies and some developing nations, the results indicate that although women, in greater numbers, are able to pursue a career, they still remain the primary caretakers of their children and are responsible for the majority of the household duties (see Gerson; Morrison; Rosenblum). Juggling these various roles on the part of married women has resulted in their dissatisfaction with the institution of marriage wherein they receive little assistance or support from their husbands.

Consequently, among single women, larger numbers are expressing their doubts about marriage, stating that there is little or no advantage in a marital relationship which subordinates them and lacks the emotional and utilitarian support they seek. Such trends have widened the gap between the sexes and have diminished the important role of the institution of marriage.

However, this widening hiatus between women and men needs to be resolved if the well-being of society is desired. In this regard, the fundamental need for the establishment of equality between men and women is a crucial matter. The Bahá'í writings explain that through the attainment of women's equal rights, humanity will become complete and balanced. But the outcome of equality between the sexes is not that of conformity to the male standard on the part of women. Rather, equal participation means that women will complement or become the fulfillment of the void which society currently experiences but has the potential for filling.

"Not until the world of women," the Bahá'í writings state, "becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be" ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Women* 8). A salient point is that there are two coequal segments, the male and female, in the world of humanity (see 'Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Women* 10). The male component is well known and developed. But the female counterpart or the "world of women," is lacking and, as yet, concealed or undisclosed.

The fact that the female element within the social system has not achieved equality with the male, means that in its present form, humanity is imperfect and incapable of realizing its full potential. The Bahá'í writings state:

...so man and woman, the two parts of the social body, must be perfect. It is not natural that either should remain undeveloped; and until both are perfected, the happiness of the human world will not be realized. ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Women* 10)

Thus, equality of the sexes in the Bahá'í context means that women will not only receive the same education and opportunity as men but will also have the opportunity to pursue their own development according to their own style or perspective and not necessarily that prevailing within the existing patriarchal system. The key to the success of the development of women and of their unique perspective depends on the degree to which men are able and willing to step aside and allow the growth and contributions of the other half of human society to become apparent. The Bahá'í writings explain that

woman was considered to be created for rearing children and attending to the duties of the household. If she pursued educational courses, it was deemed contrary to chastity; hence women were made prisoners of the household.... Bahá'u'lláh destroyed these ideas and proclaimed the equality of man and woman. He made woman respected by commanding that all women be educated, that there be no difference in the education of the two sexes and that man and woman share the same rights. ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Women* 10)

But equal opportunity, education, rights, and privileges for women are not indicative that women should behave identically to men. "In some respects," the Bahá'í writings tell us, "woman is superior to man. She is more tender-hearted, more receptive, her intuition is more intense" ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Women* 11). In another excerpt, the writings state:

...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. ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Women* 39)

But what is the female world and in what ways is it similar or different from the present hierarchical, male-oriented social system? In other words, what do we know about the female counterpart and what are possible feminine characteristics which must become integrated into the present social system as it progresses toward achieving equality between the sexes? In answer to such questions, a review of some current theoretical models and research findings regarding the emergence of the feminist perspective will be presented.

During the past twenty years, feminist theories and the feminist movement within American society have been concerned with redefining the question of what it means to be a woman. Three particular areas which will be discussed include the feminist perspective in relation to morality, reason, and science.

In her book, *Social Reconstruction of the Feminine Character*, sociologist Sondra Farganis (148), in presenting a critique of morality, reason, and science, points to the contributions made by Carol Gilligan, Nancy Hartsock, Carol McMillan, Kathy Ferguson, Sara Ruddick, Dorothy Smith, and Evelyn Fox Keller. Farganis writes that, "Their arguments are for a feminist mode of reasoning—a morality, a standpoint, and an epistemology—that counters, complements, or is distinct from a masculine morality, rationality, or science" (*Reconstruction* 149).

Morality

In terms of morality and the feminist perspective, the work of Carol Gilligan, a developmental psychologist, sheds valuable insights. She concludes that men and women offer different styles of thinking. Her research on moral development indicates that women and men view and solve moral problems differently. According to Gilligan, theories of moral development label women's experience and values as deficient or wrong simply because they deviate from developmental models based on research conducted on men. This notion, by the way, includes studies which have dropped the data on women because they "complicated" the analysis and were regarded as a kind of deviation from the male norm.

Gilligan points out that there are

social reasons to explain why girls do not see autonomy as a valuable goal and why in their search for connectedness they do not feel the same way about ambition as boys might. Boys come to develop a "self defined through separation" and a "self measured against an abstract ideal of perfection," while for girls, there is a "self delineated through connection... a self assessed through particular activities of care." (Farganis, *Reconstruction* 155)

Thus, Gilligan concludes there is an interplay between the biological and environmental factors that inclines women to be more sensitive toward the feelings of others (relatedness) in ways that men are not (differentiation). For men, morality is based on objectivity, individual rights, and rule-guided justice. For women, morality is based on care, which implies principles of equity, flexibility, and responsibility in dealing with particular situations, needs, and people. Gilligan states:

As we have listened for centuries to the voices of men and the theories of development that their experience informs, so we have come more recently to notice not only the silence of women but the difficulty in hearing what they say when they speak, Yet in the different voice of women lies the truth of an ethic of care. (*Different Voice* 173)

According to Gilligan, the male ethic of justice "proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same" (*Different Voice* 174), while the female ethic of care "rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt." Therefore, the convergence of the male/female perspectives in relation to moral development according to Gilligan, "provides [not only] a better understanding of relations between sexes but also gives rise to a more comprehensive portrayal of adult work and family relationships" (*Different Voice* 174).

Reason

In the feminist literature, there are several works that address the nature of reason or rationality and raise the issue regarding the differences in approach toward reasoning found between men and women (see McMillan; Hartsock; Ferguson, *Case*). A major point regarding rationality or reason is the fact that historically women have been isolated from the rest of society due to their suppression and inequality. Thus, they have not had the exposure to or the opportunity that men have had in participating in the public domain of politics, bureaucracy, and administration. Therefore, the female counterpart within such segments of society is not only

unknown but often unacceptable. What is at issue here is the very meaning of rationality. As Farganis points out, "Women precisely because they have been excluded from positions of public power and have been, in effect, locked out of the technocratic state, are in a more privileged position to see the irrationality of an administered state locked into a logic of nuclear annihilation" (*Reconstruction* 168).

Ferguson argues that women's relatedness experiences, which they use in their actions towards others, are in opposition to the current system of relatedness, which is highly bureaucratic and rationalistic. That is, within the current highly bureaucratic system, human interaction is depersonalized, hierarchical, and almost nonexistent. Ferguson writes:

As more and more arenas of our lives become bureaucratic, the depersonalization/alienation process correspondingly expands. (*Case* 13)

The author further points out how education, sexuality, and the family have become bureaucratized and thus are experiencing serious problems and strains.

Finally, Farganis states that:

Both with respect to theory and practice, feminism becomes the mode of reconstructing bureaucracy, and is part of an emerging literature that is critical of bureaucratic structures and the ways in which these are described. Through the notion of power as empowerment, rather than power as coercion or domination, Ferguson presents a tension between masculine and feminine voices, although she is careful to point out that these are social voices, that is, gendered rather than simply biological. (*Reconstruction* 173)

Science

The feminist stance regarding science opposes the viewpoint which postulates that science should be kept pure and out of "the service of politics" (Farganis, *Reconstruction* 184). Feminists point out that science is useful and purposeful only when it serves humanity "by providing the framework for a critique of life and life's goals and of persons and their values" (Farganis, *Reconstruction* 184). Generally, the view of feminists is that science in its present form is a masculine construction of knowledge.

Farganis (*Reconstruction* 187) points out that in the works of Susan Griffin and Carolyn Merchant, the significance and importance of the feminist perspective in science is further elaborated. She writes:

...science as it has been practiced, alienates and contributes to the domination of nature; what is needed is a science that is "feminized," that is made less alienating by being made more responsive to human needs and more ecological and more concerned with working with and not against the forces of nature. (Farganis, *Reconstruction* 187)

Elizabeth Fee (as well as other feminists) argues for an epistemology that is not male-centered. She points out that science must be refined so that the question of how science is to be used must be combined with the social responsibility of the scientists. She further states that rational reflection should not be regarded as more valuable than concern and commitment. And finally, the distancing between observer and the observed should be eliminated.

Farganis in discussing the feminist perspective on science concludes:

In an era in which one can find voices that speak passionately of their distrust of science, one can appreciate the feminist critique of science. It is a critique nurtured by Hiroshima, chemical and germ warfare, pollution, and genetic manipulation. It is within this context that the feminist critique of science has to be situated. (*Reconstruction* 189)

Thus, whether it be morality, reasoning, or science, the emerging feminist view speaks to the complementarity (as opposed to the inferiority) of the feminine character. In fact, given the present dangerous and chaotic status of the global social system, the feminine perspective emerges as an imperative model for creating a sane balance. This conceptualization appears to be in agreement and convergent with the Bahá'í concept of the equality of men and women.

Obstacles to Social Change

A challenging obstacle that prevents the full development of the feminist perspective is the present authoritarian, patriarchal system. This system, like most social systems, is resistant to change. In this case, it is inflexible and unaccepting of the different perspective that women bring to the various social institutions (perhaps the only exception here is the role of women as mothers and housewives). Generally, if women are

capable of becoming a clone of the male model of social organization, then they are more readily accepted by the system. But, as stated by the author Betty Reardon:

Feminists... insist that women need not adopt or manifest masculine values and behaviors to assert equality, nor do they devalue feminine characteristics, values, and capacities They seek to introduce feminine values into the social and political realms from which they have been excluded. (*Sexism* 20)

However, the present social structure remains unyielding and resistant to the development and inclusion of a new female viewpoint. Consequently, feminine qualities and contributions are prevented from a synthesis with the existing male-dominated system. In this regard, the Bahá'í writings are clear and directive about the role of men in taking responsibility for assuring full equality for women. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphatically states: "When men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights!" (Qtd. in *Women* 53).

The Bahá'í standpoint succinctly promotes the development of the feminine qualities over the masculine, stating that at present there exists a dangerous imbalance between the two. The Bahá'í writings state:

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. But the balance is already shifting—force is losing its weight and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine, and more permeated with the feminine ideals—or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced. (Bahá'u'lláh qtd. in *Women* 13)

Society's inability to expedite equality between the sexes is also troubling in terms of the urgent need for progress towards global peace. From the Bahá'í perspective, the equality of the sexes is viewed as a fundamental prerequisite to the achievement of peace. The Bahá'í writings state:

So it will come to pass that when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, when they enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics, war will cease; for woman will be the obstacle and hindrance to it. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 135)

It is noteworthy that sociologist Theodore Roszak, after surveying the historical rise of militarism and Fascism in the early 20th century, concluded that both trends were directly related to the failure of the 19th century feminism to achieve its goals. In the Bahá'í writings it is stated that

war and its ravages have blighted the world; the education of woman will be a mighty step toward its abolition and ending, for she will use her whole influence against war.... she will be the greatest factor in establishing universal peace and international arbitration. Assuredly, woman will abolish warfare among mankind. ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Women* 37)

In conclusion, it is evident that achieving equal participation by women in all the affairs of the global social system remains as a major challenge to humanity today. It is also a definitive fact that according to the spiritual laws and principles expounded by Bahá'u'lláh, full equality for women is mandatory to the achievement of global unity and peace. The Bahá'í writings state:

...it is well established in history that where woman has not participated in human affairs the outcomes have never attained a state of completion and perfection. On the other hand, every influential undertaking of the human world wherein woman has been a participant has attained importance....

The most momentous question of this day is international peace and arbitration, and universal peace is impossible without universal suffrage. ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Women* 37–38)

Therefore, the singular unanswered question, affecting both women and men as well as the survival of this planet, is how soon will the present antiquated, moribund global system enable the feminist qualities, characteristics, and perspective to become equally manifested within its social structure and organization? For the very survival of humanity depends upon the equal expression and achievement of women in society.

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