

The Baha'i Principle of the Equality of the Sexes – A Personal View

The starting point for the consideration of this Baha'i principle is the statement by Baha'u'llah that God has conferred upon men and women “ *a station and rank on the same plane*”. God “*hath removed all distinctions*” between them.

This equation stems from the Baha'i teachings on unity and the oneness of humankind. Thus when Abdu'l-Baha spoke by analogy about the bird with two wings, there was only one bird, in one sense representing humanity, with two wings, one men and one women. Both wings must be equally developed and work together in harmony for the bird to fly. The flight spoken of is spiritual flight or progress, in particular, the acquisition of spiritual virtues and perfections, not dependent on sex. The equality established by Baha'u'llah cannot refer to physical equality because it is evident by their physical nature that men and women were and still are different and distinct. God is not concerned with physical distinctions based on the sex of a person, but only with spirituality. In this sense, men and women are equal in the sight of God, both have the same potential to progress spiritually, even though physically and in other related respects they may not be the same.

It is this starting point that distinguishes the Baha'i principle from all secular theories of equality. The Baha'i principle is elevated to a sacred principle, a divine command, with radical consequences for every sphere of human activity. Secular theories can of course be referred to by way of comparison, but none of them will bear any significant relationship to the Baha'i principle. Comparisons with secular theories that draw out similarities should not be taken too far.

The Baha'i principle does not assert that men and women are, or ever will be, equal in physical makeup or physical function. It recognises that they have different physical natures, not to be confused with their spiritual natures. Women will continue to have certain unique physical functions and qualities that men don't have, and vica versa. Thus women will continue to perform the birth and nurturing function for children, even though men have a complimentary role in support. Men will continue , as a general rule, to be physically stronger, with certain consequences in terms of function.

But the Baha'i Writings inform us that this physical distinction will gradually lose its importance as human society becomes more united and as it progresses.

The discrimination and prejudice exhibited against women in the past because of this distinction should therefore cease.

This does not mean that men and women will lose their distinctive qualities attaching to their particular sex – the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ qualities. Thus women tend to be more tender-hearted, more receptive, more intuitive. Men tend to be more forceful, more aggressive. Abdu’l-Baha states “...*the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with feminine ideals, or to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilisation will be more evenly balanced*”.

In my view, this does not necessarily mean that men must become more feminine in nature. The balance spoken of by Abdu’l-Baha can be achieved in part at least by treating men and women equally and in involving women more equally in all branches of legitimate human activity. Thus the Universal House of Justice said “*That men and women differ from one another in certain characteristics is an inescapable fact of nature.*” This is not going to change significantly in the future. The House added “*The solution provided in the Teachings of Baha’u’llah is not, as you correctly observe, for men to become women, and for women to become men*”. Rather, men and women should compliment one another in society on terms of equality. In particular, men and women are to strive equally to acquire spiritual virtues and attributes, to be more spiritual, to be more obedient to the laws of God, to be more submissive to the Will of God, without any discrimination one against the other. It is equality that is taught, not sameness. And the unique characteristics attaching to each sex do not necessarily correspond with the virtues and attributes of God, which are sexless.

In an intellectual sense, the Baha’i Writings tell us that men and women are already equal. The difference in practice is not due to any inherent inability in women, rather it is due to the relative lack of education for women in the past. Great importance is placed in the Baha’i Writings on giving women adequate opportunities in education so that they can take an equal place in society with men. A form of affirmative action is even advocated in the Writings to achieve this equality. When women do achieve a position of equality with men in all fields of human knowledge and its application, and participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, then the Writings assure us that war will cease and world peace will be possible.

It follows from this that equality of numbers between men and women in each of the respective areas of human activity is one relevant criteria in assessing success in the application of the Baha'i principle. But this principle does not stress equality of numbers just for the sake of achieving equality of numbers. It is an equality that will arise naturally from the application of the Baha'i principle as a spiritual principle, to be wholeheartedly applied by both men and women as part of the divine Will. It will be assisted by the grant of fair and equal educational opportunities to all women worldwide, with equal opportunities to excel, both spiritually and in other respects, and with an absence of any discrimination or prejudice based on sex. In such a context, any concerns arising from the secular experience that more active participation by women in the affairs of the world will tend to result in them changing to patriarchal patterns of behaviour are misplaced in the type of spiritually based society envisaged for the future in the Baha'i Writings.

In this respect, the Baha'i principle of equality is not a form of equality that displaces the merit principle. Therefore, mathematical formulae to achieve a precise equality of numbers based on sex in every situation are irrelevant. Equality will be achieved under the Baha'i principle consistently with selection on merit precisely because no relevant distinctions are permissible under the Baha'i teachings on the basis of sex. The lip service frequently given to secular ideas of equality will be replaced by a realisation that the Baha'i principle constitutes a divine command from an all-knowing God, not to be lightly or surreptitiously avoided. That the application of the Baha'i principle might result in some slight inequality of numbers from one situation to another, some favouring one sex and some another, will not defeat or deny the Baha'i principle in practice.

The only exception to this will be membership of the Universal House of Justice, which under the Writings of Baha'u'llah is limited to men. The reason for this is not yet known, but it no doubt has something to do with inherent masculine qualities and the future role of the House in world affairs.

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