THE EQUALITY OF WOMEN
THE BAHÁ’Í PRINCIPLE OF COMPLEMENTARITY

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In this article, John S. Hatcher explores the question of how equality of the sexes and gender distinctions can co-exist. Put another way, the author attempts to demonstrate how there can be gender distinctions in function without inequality in status in the context of the Bahá’í teachings.

The Bahá’í writings, particularly the new compilations made available in recent years, abound with references regarding the principle of equality between the sexes. As well, the identification of a few gender-specific roles and functions has caused the Bahá’í community collectively to raise some questions about the implications of these roles and functions.

While I do not quarrel with most of the specific points raised by Hatcher, I wish that such an examination of gender distinctions had been undertaken within the larger overall context of the roles and responsibilities clearly played by/given to both sexes within the Bahá’í revelation. My concern is that, without explaining the overall context, such distinctions may be interpreted in stereotypical ways. For example, I feel some concern that a reading of this article may give the impression that the Bahá’í community subscribes to the prevalent contemporary view that men and women are equal but different. My reading of the Bahá’í writings leads me to a much broader concept: men and women are equal and different and the same. The and as opposed to the but configuration allows for the accommodation of greater complexity without assuming that different elements are contradictory.

Hatcher has done a creditable job of exploring the “equal” and “different” elements of the equation, but in an effort to provide a broader context for his work, I would like to explore some of the elements that show how the sexes are “the same.” The Bahá’í writings tell us that God’s revelation is for all and summons all. All human beings have been created with the capacity to know and to love God, and all have the responsibility to recognize God and to follow his commandments. This relationship between the Creator and his creatures (whether men, women, youth, or children) is strengthened by the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, fasting, study of scriptures, community gatherings, learning and teaching, and so on. In these activities and relationships, gender distinctions play no role whatsoever.

In addition, on a personal spiritual level, all women and men are required to strive to acquire the full range of human virtues and capacities. Some examples include: love, justice, honesty, faithfulness, loyalty, purity, chastity, courtesy, generosity, self-sacrifice, knowledge, wisdom, tenacity, audacity, and cleanliness. All these qualities are needed by members of both sexes, and none is barred from or exclusive to either sex.
Only a few of the hundreds of virtues enumerated in the Bahá’í writings have any "gender value" attached to them. Only a very few have been identified as qualities in which either sex is "strong" or which can be more easily acquired or manifested by one sex or the other. There are a few references to "masculine" or "feminine" qualities, and in the broader context of the Bahá’í writings, it becomes clear that such designated attributes are to be acquired by both sexes. Likewise, neither men nor women have a monopoly on any quality, whether it be "forcefulness" or "aggressiveness," "mercy" or "intuition," "love" or "service." Both sexes are instructed to strive to acquire all capacities and attributes to become spiritually developed individuals capable of making a contribution to an ever-advancing civilization. The Bahá’í view, as I interpret it, is that gender traits (aside from those related specifically to reproduction) involve differences of degree, not differences of existence or non-existence.

This is very different from the approach common to many cultures, including our own, that enumerates the differences between the sexes, whether practically or mystically, and uses this as a basis for limiting or restricting the opportunities and acceptable behaviors and activities of both. One notion that has done much damage to relations between the sexes is the idea that there are "opposite sexes." This has certainly contributed to the view that women and men are dramatically, perhaps irrevocably different, that we are virtually alien creatures with little hope of really knowing, understanding, or deeply appreciating each other. Findings from women's studies and the emerging fields of men's studies and gender studies discredit the "separate spheres" approach and indicate that both men and women stand in great need of developing the very qualities that their own cultural socialization has denied them so as to become balanced and mature individuals.

In the Bahá’í community, on the social as well as the personal level, women and men are called upon to share the same roles and responsibilities. All must assist in developing an ever-advancing civilization, and all must "be engaged in an occupation which will be of benefit to mankind" (Women 33). Parents are instructed to provide their children with moral, religious, and general or occupation-related education. This requires that all children, boys and girls, be "taught a profession, art, or trade" (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Divine Philosophy 78) and that boys and girls "follow the same curriculum of study" (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace 175). All fields are open to study by girls and boys, but a few are singled out for particular attention in the education of girls: industrial and agricultural sciences, "to assist mankind in that which is most needful" (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Promulgation 283). As well, all wage-earners, male and female, are required to pay a portion of their earnings to a trusted person with the knowledge of the Trustees of the House of Justice for the education of children (Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh 90). Thus, even individuals who are wealthy or who, as mothers or homemakers are supported by their husbands for a period of their lives, still have a social duty to be able to contribute to society through work in an art, trade, or profession.

While girls have a prior right to education over boys in a Bahá’í society because of their future role as mothers, it is my understanding that this refers to
circumstances in which, regrettably, even minimal levels of education may not be available to all the children of a family. It is clear from the overall body of the Bahá’í writings on education that girls, like boys, are to be educated for their general contribution to society through their occupations as well as for their future roles as mothers. We might also be reminded that in the Bahá’í revelation, work performed to the best of one’s ability in a spirit of service is considered as worship, and engaging in an occupation is obligatory, while marriage, though a social duty and highly desirable, is not.

Beyond providing a context of “sameness” in which gender distinctions can be examined, I would also like to comment on another approach that could have been taken by this article. The author has chosen, in his discussion of gender distinctions, to concentrate on how gender-defined functions affect women and our perception of them. Though a few male-associated gender distinctions are mentioned, I do not recall any instance in which such distinctions are discussed in a similar way in relation to men. For example, there is much discussion about how women’s primary responsibility for childbearing or how their not serving on the Universal House of Justice should not be interpreted as a lack of equality or as proof of the Bahá’í revelation upholding the old stereotypes. But there is no comparable discussion of how being assigned the role of breadwinner, when one’s children are young, should not be seen as depriving men of a more intimate relationship with their children or as saddling them with an inordinate economic burden. Nor is the question of the male stereotypic role of soldier addressed, nor how families and societies can rear sons who are peace-loving but also ready to serve their governments in a military capacity if required to do so. A discussion of these or similar issues would, I feel, have provided a more balanced view of gender distinction and avoided the possibility of implying that the issues only or primarily affect women.

I would also like to offer a few comments on specific points made in the article. First, I would like to question Hatcher’s point concerning “the tacit recreation of women in the image of men, even while we acknowledge that the male role is unbalanced, unhealthy, and the cause of much of humanity’s contemporary dilemma. Instead of inducing balance, such a response can exacerbate the very imbalance that has so afflicted human society by producing even more human beings in the mold of the stereotypical male” (59).

While the logic of this is correct, an important point is missing: such “stereotypical males” must also become (or be required to become) transformed into spiritually developed and balanced human beings. If this occurred, men could be safely emulated by anyone. But it would be unjust and paternalistic to tell or expect women (or other men) not to act in stereotypic ways if men who act in those ways continue to be rewarded for it, whether by wealth, power, prestige, attention, being taken seriously, or whatever.

Second, throughout the article, the author has examined the difference between “equality” and “identity of function,” but by not placing these “functions” in a larger context, I am concerned that they could be thought to be rigid or even absolute. For example, his discussion of mothers’ primary responsibility for
the education and training of children and fathers' responsibility to provide financially for the family fails to mention that these are time-limited responsibilities: the Universal House of Justice has stated, "... it is intended that, if possible, she [the mother] should be with the baby to train and nurture it in its earliest days and months" (Women 34). It is also made clear that the final decision regarding how a woman will rear her children and practice the occupation in which she has been trained rests with the mother: "It is for every woman, if and when she becomes a mother, to determine how best she can discharge on the one hand her chief responsibility as a mother and on the other, to the extent possible, to participate in other aspects of the activities of the society of which she forms a part" (Women 42–43).

Consider another example illustrating that gender-distinctive functions are not absolute: while the mother is designated first educator of the child, this does not mean that she (or another woman) is the only one who can perform that role. If this were an absolute function, a baby or young child would have to be taken from its father and placed for adoption in the event of its mother's death so that it could receive the benefit of care by a woman. Clearly, this would be absurd and is not a Bahá'í practice. Nor can a Bahá'í husband obtain a divorce because his wife does not wish to be a full-time mother; it is equally impossible for a Bahá'í wife to divorce her husband because she feels he does not earn a sufficient income. Any of these scenarios would be logical outcomes if the functions under discussion were considered absolute. While it is not denied in the Bahá'í teachings that some differences exist between the sexes, it is worth reminding ourselves that they are not seen to be absolute.

Third, the author has used two extended metaphors to show the "equal" but "different" approach to the sexes that I would like to question. His discussion of the "wings" concept, built upon the "two wings" image of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is interesting, but I feel it may be misleading in attributing substantial degrees of difference to the two wings. Wings, though right and left, do not, to my way of thinking, have distinct identities and functions. They are both wings: one is not a wing and the other a claw.

Likewise, the metaphor of the "tree of life" with its "leaves," "twigs," and "branches," based on symbols in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, has been taken to levels of individual interpretation which, while interesting and insightful, are hardly authoritative. For example, the author feels, metaphorically, that "the appellation 'leaf' seems to designate the woman as the key instrument by which the enlightenment and evolution of human society takes place . . . ." (65). I have not found a statement of this nature anywhere in the Bahá'í writings, and nothing in my reading has led me to believe that men have a less key role in establishing an ever-advancing civilization in the Bahá'í era than do women.

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