AUTHOR’S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON “EXPLORING MALE OPPRESSION FROM A FAMILY-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE”

Commentator: Hoda Mahmoudi


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" and the creation of a "moral and psychological climate...in which international peace can emerge." 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."

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

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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