EXPLORING MALE OPPRESSION
FROM A FAMILY-SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

Author: Janet Huggins

Although one can understand the author’s view that both men and women are oppressed under the present social system, it is not possible to accept the suggestion that male oppression is the root cause of the inequality between women and men. In the second paragraph of the article, the author makes the statement that “present-day people did not create the current system, so blaming them is not useful . . .” (48). Therefore, we are led to assume that men have little or no concern or responsibility toward the achievement of gender equality since they have not contributed to the “current system.” What I find disturbing about this assumption is that one could extend the same argument to racism. That is, this generation has not created the current system of racism; therefore, no one should be blamed or accept the blame for racism. Of course, the danger of this kind of presumption is that it ignores individual, societal, and, more importantly, spiritual responsibility. In fact, such an assumption also ignores the most important aspect of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation in terms of the achievement of individual and societal transformation.

More specifically, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá admonishes men to take an active role toward the elimination of sexism, saying that “when men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights!”1 This statement does not imply that women do not have an equally important role to play in bringing about gender equality. But certainly it is the men who have ruled within the social system, and this is where the change toward equality must take place. Regarding the responsibility of men and the changes necessary, the following statements by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are illuminating:

> 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.2

... imbued with the same virtues as man, rising through all the degrees of human attainment, women will become the peers of men, and until this equality is established, true progress and attainment for the human race will not be facilitated.

... Therefore, as woman advances toward the degree of man in power and privilege,

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with the right of vote and control in human government, most assuredly war will cease; for woman is naturally the most devoted and staunch advocate of international peace.\textsuperscript{3}

The above quotations, which are only a sample, imply that currently men, as a group, are the ones with power, privilege, opportunity, and control. Therefore, there is a clear directive that requires of men the application of spiritual principles—both on a personal and on a societal level—toward the achievement of gender equality.

Furthermore, the article does not address the obvious inequality that women of today are experiencing at all levels of society, an inequality that can be remedied by those in positions of power and influence. Those who predominantly hold such positions and have the power to motivate change throughout the world are the men. A few examples regarding the status and oppression of women in the United States should suffice. The average working woman’s salary over the past twenty years continues to be far less than the average for men (about 60 cents for every one dollar that a man earns). Over eighty percent of full-time working women earn less than $20,000 a year. According to Susan Faludi, this number is nearly double the male rate.\textsuperscript{4} Women with a college degree continue to earn less than do men with a high-school diploma. Of all the federal and state judges, only eight percent are women. Only six percent of all law partners are women. Of all the corporate managers, only one-half of one percent are women. There are currently two female United States senators, and three state governors. Of the Fortune 500 companies, only two chief executives are women. Over ninety-nine percent of private employers do not provide child care. Women attending college receive seventy percent of the aid that undergraduate men receive in grants and work-study positions. In the 1980s, according to Faludi, about half of all homeless women (the fastest growing segment of the homeless) were runaways from domestic violence. Domestic violence has been on the increase since the 1980s, with wife battering as the leading cause of injury to women.

The statistics from other nations, in particular the Third World, regarding the status of women and their absolute lack of basic human rights are equally grim. The following examples are representative:

- In Colombia during 1982, the Forensic Institute of Bogota found that of 1,170 cases of bodily injuries, one in five was due to conjugal violence—and ninety-four percent of those hospitalized were battered women.
- India had approximately 1,000 registered cases of dowry deaths in 1985, 1,319 in 1986, and 1,786 in 1987.


• Of the 153 Kuwaiti women asked if they had ever been assaulted, one-third answered that they had. Asked if they knew of friends or relatives who had been victims of such violence, eighty percent responded affirmatively.
• In Thailand, twenty-five percent of the malnourished children at a Bangkok rehabilitation center treated during the first half of 1985 were from families where the mother was regularly beaten by her spouse. More than fifty percent of married women from Bangkok’s biggest slum and construction sites were regularly beaten by their husbands.5

It seems to me that the data are quite conclusive, indicating that women have not achieved nearly the level of equality that the Bahá’í Revelation advances.

Rather than going into a more detailed description of other incongruities that appear in the article, I would like to mention just one other important point. On page 53, the author begins a listing of solutions she identifies as necessary to achieve gender equality. What is troublesome about the first solution (“to recognize that the problem of inequality is multifaceted” not “villain/victim”) is that it ignores the significant, grave issue of violence against women (which is on the rise throughout the world) and the lack of human rights for women, not to mention the other inequalities noted above. The question I wish to ask is, What is the responsibility that men must shoulder in the elimination of these grievous social ills? Since men are the primary perpetrators of these acts of violence and injustice, should they not take a more aggressive role toward their elimination?

As to the second solution, it does not offer any practical guidelines as to how both sexes can be “helped” to overcome their so-called oppression. What is most distressing about this matter is that none of the Bahá’í principles—such as, how to bring about equality in the home and society, how to use consultation so as not to dominate others, what it means to create an environment in which women enjoy equal access and opportunity at all levels of society, how to bring about unity in diversity by learning how to listen to the voices of women and allow them equal participation in all spheres of life—are discussed as solutions to this problem.

As to the third and last solution regarding the differences between men and women, the author simply states this to be a fact but does not explain its importance. In the compilation of Bahá’í writings on women,6 numerous quotations address gender differences and their importance in bringing about equality between the sexes. All of these quotations point to one important consequence: until the equality of women and men is realized, society will not reach its highest potential. The following are some quotations that address the


issue of gender differences (not solely biological differences) and why women must achieve equality:

They will prove that in this cycle women are equal to men, nay in certain respects they will excel.7

In some respects, women have astonishing capacities; they hasten in their attraction to God, and are intense in their fiery ardour for Him.8

In this day the duty of everyone, whether man or woman, is to teach the Cause. In America, the women have outdone the men in this regard and have taken the lead in this field. They strive harder in guiding the peoples of the world, and their endeavours are greater.9

The woman has greater moral courage than the man; she has also special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger and crisis.10

Therefore, 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. . . . for man is more inclined to war than woman, and a real evidence of woman’s superiority will be her service and efficiency in the establishment of universal peace.11

You are quite right in stating that men and women have basic and distinct qualities. The solution provided in the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh is not . . . for men to become women, and for women to become men.12

It may be helpful to stress . . . that the Bahá’í principle of the equality of men and women is clearly stated in the teachings, and the fact that there is diversity of function between them in certain areas does not negate this principle.13

. . . they may be even superior to the men, versed in sciences and yet detached, so that the whole world may bear witness to the fact that men and women have absolutely the same rights.14

... and as regards tenderness of heart and the abundance of mercy and sympathy ye are superior.\textsuperscript{15}

In some respects woman is superior to man. She is more tender-hearted, more receptive, her intuition is more intense.\textsuperscript{16}

To achieve equality between women and men, we must begin to analyze seriously the practical steps toward its implementation. That is, how do we begin within the family to free the husband and wife of the stereotypic roles (practiced for centuries) that continue to perpetuate inequality? Should the mother do all the work of rearing the children and the housework at the cost of not pursuing either a career or other interests? Or does it mean that husbands must also share in the domestic role regardless of whether they are the sole “breadwinner” or not? What does it mean to be in a marriage where both partners enjoy full equality? How does Bahá’u’lláh define our spiritual responsibility to one another in this context? Likewise, at work what does it mean to have women at equal levels with men? How do we then begin to take practical steps to achieve these important goals as given to humanity by Bahá’u’lláh? It seems to me that rather than speaking about male oppression, which is a difficult concept to accept given the patterns in today’s society, this article could have addressed the more critical matter of how to accomplish the principle of full equality between women and men in our daily lives.

Finally, it is true that through socialization we internalize our family norms. It is also true that sometimes we come from families where we have experienced some form of abuse and oppression. However, except for the extreme or pathological cases of abuse and oppression, we are not all “victims” or prisoners of our familial milieu. Again, this is where our faith in Bahá’u’lláh and his limitless Revelation must be systematically understood and methodically internalized to bring about the transformational change necessary to spiritualize society and bring Bahá’u’lláh’s principles to everyday life.

Victimization often implies that an outward force, such as the family or society, is responsible for the individual’s behavior. Bahá’u’lláh’s injunction is that regardless of our background and experiences, if we open our hearts and minds to his Revelation, if we take the daily steps toward our own spiritualization, we can bring about a total spiritual transformation, not only of the self but also of society and, ultimately, the world. It is in this area of personal spiritual change (where the motivation for this change is Bahá’u’lláh) that the article seems to fail to offer any understanding or solutions. That is, we cannot simply imply that since men are oppressed, they therefore do not need to

\textsuperscript{15} ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, \textit{Paris Talks} 184; cited in \textit{Women} 12.

concern themselves too seriously with the implementation of the equality between the sexes. It is precisely because men come out of a system that oppresses women that men must take full responsibility toward a spiritual change not only in their own behavior but also in the shift that must take place at all levels of society.

HODA MAHMOUDI