I was interested to read Roxanne Lalonde’s thoughtful commentary in response to my essay, “Women in Art.” Lalonde raises some important issues and speaks to the need of addressing questions of gender in relationship to Bahá’í teachings, ideals, and family life. Certainly we can benefit from more dialogue on the subject, and I hope that her commentary and my response will generate even more reaction—from men as well as women.

Lalonde states that there have been many women in the twentieth century whose achievements have been recognized and lauded. While this is true, I am sure there are countless others whose works go unnoticed or whose dreams are thwarted. One can argue that these difficulties also affect male artists: the arts have traditionally been an arena in which survival and success have been fraught with extreme hardship, and success often comes after death. (Van Gogh, for example, sold only one painting during his lifetime.) However, sexism compounds the problem for women artists.

In the case of gender, it remains true that we grapple in general with the position of girls and women. The terms of discourse in art, education, politics, and business are often male biased; the male experience is still seen as the universal experience. Here, for example, is a passage from a contemporary textbook (1987) of essays on adolescent development:

Every human being passes through various ages, and at each one he attains and uses different biological and intellectual capacities. At each stage he performs different tasks and roles in relation to the other members of his society; from a child, he becomes a father, from a pupil, a teacher; from a vigorous youth, a mature adult, and then an “old man.”

The essay continues to describe human development with almost no regard for the experience of girls and women. While the essay is reprinted from a journal published in 1961 (somehow we excuse the scholarship and language of earlier times when the male pronoun and experience were more universally accepted as the norm), the editor of the anthology has made no attempt to comment on the piece’s bias. We are left, therefore, wondering whether to regard a sentence such as the following as ludicrous or uncomfortably telling of the ongoing absence of female validation: “The adult either develops naturally into an old man—or decays into one.”

2. Eisenstadt, “Archetypal Patterns” 49.
A 1988 *Wall Street Journal* article pointed out that sex bias in education has an adverse effect on women’s behavior in the workplace, citing findings such as the fact that boys are five times more likely to receive attention from teachers, eight times more likely to speak in class, and twice as likely to ask for help or to be seen as model students in coeducational schools. The study notes that damage to self-esteem, passivity, and lack of confidence result, even though students, teachers, and administrators are often unaware of inequities. Thus, women are less likely to become managers or to present themselves as effective managers in the workplace. It would seem likely that this adverse effect would be even truer in creative callings, where a high degree of autonomy and self-esteem is essential.

Lalonde addresses the issue of confidence and criticism, saying that people in general and artists in particular fear criticism when they do not feel confident about their work. I think that one can have—must have—confidence (or at least inner direction) in order to create, yet still be acutely sensitive to criticism. Perhaps with time and experience one is hardened to public opinion or to the lack of it. But here women seem to be at a definite disadvantage; not only do we have less opportunity to become accustomed to criticism in the workplace or art world, we also seem to have a genetic disposition towards a more personal orientation to the world and are reared to regard pleasing others as important. Hence, being faced with criticism can be a major impediment to claiming and sustaining a voice for women in general. Lalonde is fortunate that she has never felt her work was being judged on the basis of her sex. I wonder how many women artists (or how many minority artists on the basis of their race) can say that. Robert Hayden often deplored being referred to as a black poet, as if the reference to his race meant that there were other standards than those for white poets. For women in the art world, it is much the same case.

I personally feel that we need to be light-handed with our criticism at this time in Bahá’í history and to focus on positive achievement, especially in the arts. Criticism can be deadly to creativity. Brenda Ueland, in a work entitled *If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence, and Spirit* discusses the tragic effect that criticism can have upon the writer:

> The critics rap us savagely on the head with their thimbles, for our nerve. No one but a virtuoso should be allowed to do it. This is one of the results: that people who try to write become anxious, timid, contracted, become perfectionists, so terribly afraid that they may put something down that is not as good as Shakespeare. . . . I hate it [criticism] because of the potentially shining, gentle, gifted people of all ages it snuffs out every year. It is a murderer of talent. And because the most modest and

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sensitive people are the most talented... these are the very first ones to get killed off. It is the brutal egotists that survive.4

At the conclusion of his essay “Can There Be A Bahá’í Poetry?” Geoffrey Nash articulates the following appeal:

To the communities of Bahá’ís we say: be kind to all with artistic gifts—to those who invariably are introverted and ineloquent in all but their art. To the lonely Bahá’í poet . . . , writing in inhospitable circumstances among aliens or not always enlightened friends, we say: persevere in what you have been given, in what you have to do; do not hide your light under a bushel.5

I think that Nash’s admonition is particularly appropriate for women, minorities, and communities sensitive to them as we seek to rebalance the affairs of the world, through art or other means.

Recognizing some of the obstacles in creating change is important. A 1992 article in the Dallas Morning News pointed out that while many male scientists agree that women should be allowed to compete in the “big leagues of science,” they want women to play science by men’s rules. Because science’s structure evolved as an almost exclusively “man’s game,” it has “a rigid topical structure, with a compartmentalization that generally keeps individual researchers isolated on discipline-specific islands. . . . An influx of women and minorities would improve the prospects for scientific progress,” the article claims. “Women and people of color are more interested in the social aspects of science, the practical uses to which it could be put. . . . But science can’t benefit from the female perspective until male scientists appreciate it.”6 I think the same could be said of any field.

Lalonde’s reference to the partnership model and to Riane Eisler’s description of history implies that what we need is not just a movement away from male dominance but a whole new perspective on what constitutes “authority” or even valued experience. Replacing an “either/or” dichotomy with a “both/and” outlook is not easy feat, and art criticism, for example, like many other arenas, has been based on a master authority model reflecting male standards and views. Women have learned to collude with this vision, to imitate and reflect it, to accept it even while feeling mild discomfort, hopelessness, or full-blown disgust.

Positioning herself in relation to the male, woman has sought to become what he desires. Man, capitalizing on his own power, has sought to maintain the importance of the male perspective. Thus, in visual art, women are placed in an

object position, to be viewed (possessed, bought, and sold) by male spectators. Women, taught to view ourselves as the viewed, are not sure how to come into a subject position. We often do not even know what we want to see, or how we want to be seen. Our age is fraught with ambivalence.

In the surrealist movement of this century, for example, the idea of woman (seen as closer to the realm of the unconscious) was lauded. Male surrealists relied on the image of woman as the mediating link between man and “the marvelous.” Woman helped to give expression to male dreams and desires, but man still controlled the voice. It was the male artist who was seen as the unifying force in the male–female polarity, having access to both realms of being. As André Breton stated:

The time will come when the ideas of woman will be asserted at the expense of those of man, the failure of which is already today tumultuously evident. Specifically, it rests with the artist to make visible everything that is part of the feminine, as opposed to the masculine, system of the world. It is the artist who must rely exclusively on the woman’s power to exalt, or better still, to jealously appropriate to himself everything that distinguishes woman from man with respect to their styles of appreciation and volition.7

But for Breton it was the idea of woman (presented by men) that will prevail, not the real woman. Real women wanting to be part of the movement had to position themselves in marginal roles around the men. (In an early photograph we see a group of male surrealists surrounding Breton’s first wife, who was in the center but not centered, bent over a typewriter where she was recording one of their dreams.)

Frequently surrealistic art was full of distortions and brutality of the female body, with women veiled and headless, often armless, exposed, bound, vulnerable, acted upon, “man”handled, epitomized by mangled dolls. The women themselves took part in creating some of these images; for the surrealist, the pathological was the norm—anything that countered bourgeois convention was seen as liberating. Yet it becomes problematic for scholars to address the role of women in this movement, as it is clear the women felt isolated from the shared ideology that informed the work of the men and did not see themselves as “true” surrealists. Rather they often functioned in supportive roles to the men, and in their own work (often full of self-portraiture) they gained access to the unconscious by confronting their own realities. As Frieda Kahlo expressed, Breton and his circle “thought I was a surrealist, but I wasn’t. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.”8

The muse, to some of the women associated with surrealism, was an externalized source of creative energy, a personification of the female “other” that was a male invention—one not very helpful to women painters. Meret Oppenheim, creator of the famed fur-lined cup now on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, describes her reconciliation with the idea of male dominance and her idea of the androgyny of the creative spirit in her own perspective on the muse:

The “Muse” is an allegorical representation of the spiritual female part in the creative male, the “genius.” And the “genius” represents the spiritual male part in the creative female, the “Muse.” Personally I consider the problem of female versus male as solved, although I know that many have not arrived at this point.9

Whether or not we have arrived at a point of resolution, I think that many will agree that while chauvinism itself is waning, unconscious sexism is not. In some countries at least we need not fear overt attacks; blatant sexism is not “politically correct” these days. But the underlying issue has not seemed to change; we still live in a world in which women are often called “girls,” though a man of the same age would never be called a “boy.” “Girls” is not even recognized by many as a pejorative term. Neither is the more offensive term, “gals.” Just as our racism is often unrecognized, denied, uncult with, so is our sexism. Thus we maintain a society of girls and men.

Baha'i communities are not exempt from this reality. One night I was teaching a children’s class, and part of the lesson was on equality of the sexes. The girls avidly entered into the discussion, citing many instances in which they wished their brothers and the boys at school would treat them differently. One boy in the class simply rolled his eyes and slipped out of the room after a time. It is uncomfortable for some, particularly males, to address these issues, to listen to female voices—even at age eight or nine.

Another painful sight was a skit that portrayed a mixed group of children learning about and accepting the Baha’i Faith. In the next scene, they are serving together on a local spiritual assembly. Next we see the same group serving on a national spiritual assembly. In the final scene, the girls remain backstage, and we see the boys serving on the Universal House of Justice. What does this teach our children—that girls can only go so far and at some point must remain in the background? “Either/or” thinking has excluded them from further development; “both/and” thinking might have presented them as Counsellors or teachers or Hands of the Cause, working alongside of the House of Justice.

I now want to address the major crux of Lalonde’s statement about women in art, regarding the Baha’i perspective on motherhood. Lalonde says that Baha’i women need not feel paralyzed about the conflict between career and

9. Chadwick, Women Artists 12.
family because it is clear that mothering is a noble and unique service to humanity and that nothing must interfere with the woman’s responsibility to her children. She also speaks about a time when “more and more women will choose to pursue full-time motherhood” and “social institutions will be structured to accommodate this task” (75).

At the present time, it is clear that many women do not have choices with regard to work; in theory we may support the Bahá’í teachings and strive to live in conformity with them, but in reality it may be difficult or seemingly impossible because of financial needs or other circumstances such as divorce or death of a spouse. As well, a woman at home with her child or children may also have a great need to nurture her calling or career, or be subject to great depression or jeopardy with regard to her profession. I have asked several Bahá’í mothers who are creative how they manage to balance their lives, and they say, “I am always torn—and tired,” or “There is no way I can put off my artistic career. I involve my daughter in it; she learns along with me,” or “There are sacrifices for everything we want to do. I hope that I can be a writer again after my children are grown.” For those like this last woman, a reminder that many accomplished writers (such as Jane Austin, Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, the Brontë sisters, Eudora Welty, George Eliot, and Carson McCullers) did not have children seems significant, as she becomes more and more aware of the gap between some of her dreams and reality, regardless of how much she loves her offspring.

Even without children, women struggle with balance in married life; and while there is theoretical equality in marriage, men often have more privilege than women. For many reasons, women now seem to have a harder time finding, creating, and sustaining appropriate, healthy partnerships (a fact that may also be true for some men), and many women who would like to be mothers cannot because of lack of a partner, or they choose to do so on their own, which presents other problems.

In any case, my major point of difference here with Lalonde is that we cannot afford to remove ourselves from the struggle or pretend that it does not exist. Because the Bahá’í writings decree that the sexes are equal does not mean that we need not work to achieve equality—perhaps it is a constant process. Life is full of tensions, of struggles, for all of us. The woman artist has particular challenges to face. Let us not undervalue these struggles.

At the same time, we can take refuge in the writings of our religion as we envision a better future:

In this Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, the women go neck and neck with the men. In no movement will they be left behind. Their rights with men are equal in degree. They will enter all the administrative branches of politics. They will attain in all such a degree as will be considered the very highest station of the world of humanity and will take part in all affairs. Rest ye assured. Do ye not look upon the present
conditions; in the not far distant future the world of women will become all-refulgent
and all-glorious, For His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh Hath Willed It so.¹⁰

Not with blinded eyes do we look to this time, but with vision informed by the
realization that anything worthy requires our attention and commitment to the
work at hand.

Anne Gordon Atkinson Perry

¹⁰. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911,