

# Preparing Bahá'í Communities in the East and West to Embrace Gender Equality

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## Introduction

The oneness of humankind is the pivotal principle of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. Its realization is impossible without restoring to women the human rights denied them since time immemorial. Gender equality, a principle revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, is an essential prerequisite of the unity of humankind and one of the most difficult to achieve worldwide. Inequality goes back many centuries. Its practice is rooted in time-honored traditions and condoned in almost all past religions. Eradicating a practice so long upheld and accepted by both men and women as the way God had intended it to be requires patience, painstaking effort and supreme wisdom. The principle of gender equality was revealed by Bahá'u'lláh; the ground for its meaningful achievement was laid by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His ministry. This paper deals with the intricacies involved and the remarkable way He dealt with the matter. It examines some of His writings revealed in honor of the Bahá'í women in Iran and North America, and the methods He used to utilize their energy and capabilities for the furtherance of the Cause of God. The paper also looks at the practical ways He educated Bahá'í men to accept women as their equal. Finally, it discusses the glowing result He achieved in a relatively short time.

## The Establishment of Bahá'í Communities: Historical Background

### 1. The Establishment of Bahá'í Communities in the East

The arenas of Bábí activities, which began with the declaration of the Báb in Shiraz, Iran in May 1844, were Iran and Iraq. The Báb was born in Shiraz in 1819 and executed in Tabriz in 1850. During His ministry, many embraced His Cause and Bábí communities were established in numerous centers in the two countries where His Faith spread.

Bahá'u'lláh, for Whose Advent The Báb had come to prepare the people, was also a native of Iran. He was born in Tihran in 1817 and embraced the Bábí Faith shortly after The Báb declared His Mission. Bahá'u'lláh's active involvement in promoting the Bábí Faith and His leadership of the community, after the martyrdom of The Báb, made Him a target for severe persecution leading to His banishment from Iran. He left for Baghdad in January 1853. Ten years later, as He was leaving Baghdad for Constantinople (Istanbul) in spring 1863, Bahá'u'lláh declared that He was the One promised by all past religions, Whose advent the Báb had heralded, and for Whom He had sacrificed His life. Those who embraced Bahá'u'lláh's Cause became known as Bahá'ís. Bahá'u'lláh was further exiled to Adrianople (Edirne) and 'Akká, where He passed away in 1892. During His ministry (1863–1892), His Cause spread to more than a dozen countries where Bahá'í communities were established.

### 2. The Establishment of Bahá'í Communities in the West

Shortly after Bahá'u'lláh's Ascension, Ebrahim Kheirallah, the first Bahá'í of Syrian origin who had embraced the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh in Cairo, Egypt around 1890, set foot on American soil.<sup>1</sup> His settlement in Chicago in February 1894 marked the beginning of the establishment of a Bahá'í community in that city. Gradually the

teachings of the nascent Faith spread and Bahá'í communities were established in different parts of North America, whence it spread to Europe and other parts of the western hemisphere.

### The Principle of Gender Equality and Its Impact on the Evolution of Bahá'í Institutions in the West

As the number of new adherents in the United States swelled and their thirst for receiving more elaborate and clear guidance regarding the Bahá'í Faith intensified, it became clear that they needed assistance from seasoned and knowledgeable Bahá'ís to deepen their understanding of the tenets of the Bahá'í Faith. To provide for this need, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent emissaries consisting of Bahá'í men of recognized ability from the Middle East to visit North America. Among them was Mírzá Asadu'lláh-i-Isfahání.<sup>2</sup> During his visit to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, elected consultative bodies comprising of adult male Bahá'ís were elected. Whether this was a coincidence or happened by design, Mírzá Asadu'lláh has been credited with helping to organize the Bahá'í communities administratively. Although renowned and knowledgeable, he was not free from the influences of time-honored traditions and gender-based biases of the Middle Eastern countries. When preparations were being made for consultative bodies to be elected, he supported the view that women were not allowed to serve on them. It is interesting to note that at that time American women had not yet gained the right to vote and gender equality still remained a distant dream. Therefore, Mírzá Asadu'lláh's understanding of the law must have seemed reasonable and in accord with what was the norm. That development, however, set in motion a long process of education by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the aim of which was to prepare Bahá'í communities in the west to embrace the principle of gender equality. Although He did not interfere with what had happened and did not annul the body which excluded women from its membership, He steered the

affairs in a manner that led to the Bahá'í women gaining the right to be elected and the men to accept them as their equal in every respect.

As an authorized translation of the text of the Most Holy Book was unavailable, the western believers initially depended for their knowledge of the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas on the understanding of male Bahá'ís from the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> One of the laws of the Most Holy Book says: "The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counselors to the number of Bahá..."<sup>4</sup> This verse refers to the establishment of Local Houses of Justice and makes no reference to the gender of the members. In the same Book, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the "Seat of Justice", admonishes "its men to observe pure justice...", and also addresses the "Men of Justice!"<sup>5</sup> In the early stages of the development of the Faith and until 'Abdu'l-Bahá made the intent of the law clear, although Bahá'ís in the east and the west were aware of the principle of gender equality, they generally believed that all Houses of Justice excluded women from their membership. Considering the heightened level of gender bias, which had traditionally kept women outside the arena of decision-making institutions, this was not surprising. The erroneous understanding of the Bahá'í law was, however, challenged by some western women believers during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. With supreme wisdom He gradually disclosed the intent of the law which made it possible for women to serve on all the institutions of the Faith save that of the Universal House of Justice.

The first "House of Justice", later named the "House of Spirituality", was elected in Chicago in early 1900. The election took place during the prolonged visit of Mírzá Asadu'lláh. This institution as well as the Council Board formed in New York later that year excluded women from their membership.<sup>6</sup>

According to Nathan Rutstein, author of *Corinne True*, "They had seen a copy of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, which mentions the development of

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*Houses of Justice. So, even though the Master didn't request the believers to organize administratively, some prominent Chicago Bahá'ís felt they should. After all, He hadn't said they couldn't... people like Thornton Chase believed that organizing the Faith would protect it from confusion and schism.*"<sup>7</sup> For reasons of prudence, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised that it be not called the House of Justice, therefore it was called the 'House of Spirituality.' As already stated, women were initially excluded from its membership. Some women, prominent among them Corinne True, felt uneasy about the exclusion of women. Rutstein writes:

Corinne True followed the development of the House of Spirituality keenly. It bothered her that women weren't allowed to serve on the body. She didn't protest, but instead made a commitment to try to change the membership to include women...she was sure that Bahá'u'lláh had inaugurated a new era, in which women would realize equal status with men. But many of the early Bahá'ís ... didn't subscribe to Corinne True's beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

Corinne True referred the matter to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Successor of Bahá'u'lláh and the authorized Interpreter of His Writings.<sup>9</sup> Her missive is unavailable, but it is not difficult to surmise from the response she received what the contents of her letter were. A part of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's response reads:

... in the sight of Bahá, women are accounted the same as men, and God hath created all humankind in His own image, and after His own likeness. That is, men and women alike are the revealers of His names and attributes, and from the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between them. Whosoever draweth nearer to God, that one is the most favoured, whether man or woman. How many handmaids, ardent and devoted, hath, within the sheltering shade of Bahá, proved superior to the men, and surpassed the famous of the earth.

In the same Tablet, He says

The House of Justice, however, according to the explicit text of the Law of God, is confined to men; this for a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon.<sup>10</sup>

The contents of this Tablet praising the ardent and devoted women believers who, He says, had proved superior to the men and surpassed the famous of the earth came to them as a real surprise. How do we know this? A Tablet revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in honor of Thornton Chase makes this clear. The Tablet reads:

It may be that letters addressed to the women believers do indeed contain certain passages written by way of encouragement, but the purpose of such passages is to show that, in this new age, some of the women have outshone some of the men – not that all women have excelled all men! The members of the Spiritual Assembly should do all they can to provide encouragement to the women believers. In this dispensation one should not think in terms of “men” and “women”[,] all are under the shadow of the Word of God and, as they strive the more diligently, so shall their reward be the greater – be they men or women or the frailest of people.<sup>11</sup>

The second part of the Tablet to Corinne True refers to the “explicit text of the Law of God”<sup>12</sup> according to which, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “[t]he House of Justice ... is confined to men.” He also speaks of “a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon.” It is most significant that 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks not of a reason, but a “wisdom” for the exclusion of women from membership on the House of Justice. Had He spoken of “a reason”, men would have been confirmed in their belief that something inherent in women makes them unfit to serve on the

House of Justice. `Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of a “wisdom”, but provides no clue to help humanity to unravel it. He actually defers its manifestation to a future date. He also speaks of the “explicit text of the Law” without identifying it. Moreover, He does not make the intent of the Law clear.

## Wisdom, Its Role and Significance in Scripture

Wisdom is a word repeatedly used in Bahá'í Writings. To understand its different meanings to the best degree possible, we need to examine the concept as it has been used in the Writings, which is outside the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say here that one kind of wisdom is inscrutable to all but God. Another is the kind that only appointed interpreters comprehend. A third is the kind that is within the realm of possibility for human beings to understand, but requires time. The wisdom of which `Abdu'l-Bahá speaks in His Tablet to Corinne True does not fall under the first two categories, for He says ere long it will be made manifest very clearly, like the sun at high noon. Corinne True was eager to know the reason for women's exclusion from membership on the House of Justice. `Abdu'l-Bahá did not provide a reason. Instead, He spoke of a wisdom. Why? One may observe:

Reason requires a premise. A premise is “a statement of fact or a supposition made or implied as a basis of argument.” Reason is “a statement offered in explanation or justification.” It requires “due exercise of the faculty of logical thought.”<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, wisdom does not require a premise. It is defined as “(possession of) experience and knowledge together with the power of applying them critically or practically.”<sup>14</sup>

As stated earlier, had `Abdu'l-Bahá used the word “reason”, it would have caused everyone to look for something inherently wrong with

women to justify their exclusion from membership on the elective arm of the Administrative Order. Were there a reason, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would have pronounced it when the world was ready and eager to hear and accept it. In His Writings and discourses 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that lack of education had kept women backward and in the background. Women had not chosen to be uneducated; this injustice, like many others, had been imposed upon them by a patriarchal society. Moreover, the removal of the cause should remove the effect, which is not the case here.

The term “wisdom” shifted the believers’ attention from centering focus and dwelling on women’s inferiority, which they thought had made women unsuitable to serve on decision-making institutions, to something they were incapable of comprehending. The focus on “reason” had traditionally led to the degradation of women’s status in religion. The focus on “wisdom” was the first step in implementing the principle of gender equality. Bahá'u'lláh had already dealt with men’s perceived superiority when He revealed: “[T]he Pen of the Most High hath lifted distinctions from between His servants and handmaidens ... hath broken the back of vain imaginings with the sword of utterance and hath obliterated the perils of idle fancies through the pervasive power of His might.”<sup>15</sup>

Fully aware of the social requirements of the time and the incapacity of a society utterly unprepared for grasping the significance of the principle of gender equality, 'Abdu'l-Bahá dealt with a persistent question in a way that did not disrupt the progress of the Faith at that early stage of its development. He focused on educating the community by encouraging women to forge ahead in the teaching field. He guided them to found Spiritual Assemblies. Addressing the women believers, He said:

...O ye...handmaids who are enamored of the heavenly fragrances, arrange ye holy gatherings, and found ye Spiritual

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Assemblies, for these are the basis for spreading the sweet savors of God, exalting His Word, promulgating His religion and promoting His Teachings, and what bounty is there greater than this...<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, He made it known to all that male superiority was caused by physical force and the exigency of the primitive age of the human race, that distinction based on gender was not in God's plan for creation, that the injustices women had suffered as a result of their unequal status with men had to be rectified. He emphasized that women, too, were made in the image of God, affirmed that in the sight of God men and women are the same, and prepared the men to accept women as their equal. Had He explained at the outset what the intent of the Law was, had He overruled the men whose misunderstanding of the intent of the Law had caused the confusion, those men and their supporters would have been startled, nay dismayed, and chaos would have ensued. Divine wisdom dictated that the intent of the Law be gradually disclosed, and that the believers be given ample time to be educated to accept the outcome. This conjecture is confirmed by the contents of a Tablet revealed in honor of one or more female believers in Tihiran, which will be discussed later in this paper.

The events that took place following the revelation of the Tablet to Corinne True unravel how 'Abdu'l-Bahá prepared the community for women's membership on National and Local Houses of Justice in a way that when the time came, the transition was smooth and the outcome was accepted by all. The key to the smooth transition was the women's obedience to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's directives. They did as He had advised and focused their energies more than ever before on teaching the nascent Faith and spreading the Cause of God in the United States and abroad. They founded an "Assembly of Teaching" and outdid the men in the arena of promoting the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. For a while the House of Spirituality and the Assembly

of Teaching operated as parallel institutions. This anomaly, which was causing confusion, was dealt with successfully with the cooperation of the women. However, the question of the exclusion of women from membership on the House of Spirituality did not go away. In response to further questions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirmed the eligibility of women for membership on local and national Bahá'í institutions. This was contrary to the understanding of those who had initially thought otherwise. By this time, the process of educating the believers to understand the implications of gender equality had taken root; the believers understood and accepted the intent of the Law, as explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá':

According to the ordinances of the Faith of God, women are the equals of men in all rights save only that of membership on the Universal House of Justice, for as hath been stated in the text of the Book, both the head and the members of the House of Justice are men.

He further stated:

in all other bodies, such as the Temple Construction Committee, the Teaching Committee, the Spiritual Assembly, and in charitable and scientific associations, women share equally in all rights with men.<sup>17</sup>

In this Tablet 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only reveals the intent of the Law by confirming women's eligibility for membership on all institutions "save only that of membership on the Universal House of Justice", but He also identifies "the text of the Book," according to which, He says, "both the head and the members of the House of Justice are men."

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the institution of Guardianship.<sup>18</sup> In His Will and Testament 'Abdu'l-Bahá delineates the manner of the election of the Universal House of Justice

and designates the Guardian of the Cause of God as “its sacred head and the distinguished member for life of that body.”<sup>19</sup> The text of the Book mentioned in this context may, therefore, be a reference to His Will and Testament.

In the initial Tablet to Corinne True, the ineligibility of women for membership on the “House of Justice”, which was understood to include all Houses of Justice, was linked to a wisdom of Lord God’s. For that wisdom to be made manifest in a way that everyone would see it clearly, time was needed to prepare the ground for women’s membership on all the institutions of the Faith, save that of the Universal House of Justice. To prove to the men that women had the ability to enter all fields of service and excel in what they did, and also to prove to the women that they were up to the task, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged some capable women to undertake responsibilities that until then had been reserved for men. For example, it was through His encouragement that Corinne True became involved with looking for land and with the finances of the Mother Temple of the West. Her active involvement and success was instrumental in her membership on the Temple Unity Board, a prelude to the election of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada. Her dedicated services to the Faith, which were demonstrated most ably, were widely recognized and revealed to skeptics among the believers that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had stated, when women and men are given equal opportunities, they prove equal to the task. At the first National Bahá’í Convention of North America, two women were elected to the National Spiritual Assembly, Corinne True being one of them. Everyone accepted the outcome without hesitation. Women’s eligibility for election on decision-making bodies had by then become an established fact.

The question of the ineligibility of women for membership on the Universal House of Justice, however, persisted. It was raised again during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi and has been raised since the

establishment of the Universal House of Justice. The responses have been invariably based on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets on the subject, especially the one quoted above. In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 28 July 1930, it is stated:

...[T]here is a Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which He definitely states that the membership of the Universal House is confined to men, and that the wisdom of it will be fully revealed and appreciated in the future. In the local as well as the national Houses of Justice, however, women have the full right of membership. It is, therefore, only to the International House that they cannot be elected."

In the same letter, the Bahá'ís are advised to "accept this statement of the Master in a spirit of deep faith, confident that there is a divine guidance and wisdom behind it which will be gradually unfolded to the eyes of the world."<sup>20</sup>

### The Response of the Bahá'ís of Iran to the Principle of Gender Equality

The genesis of organized Bahá'í activity in Iran is not as clearly described and documented as that in the West. Once a general history of the Faith in the land of its birth becomes available, it will explain how it all started. For the time being what is known is this: the first group of believers who, in their rudimentary understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's commandment in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* "that in every city a House of Justice be established"<sup>21</sup> came together and formed an Assembly for the purpose of looking after the affairs of the community, were all men and initially self-appointed. The membership continued to be all-male long after it became an elected institution.

The women's exclusion from membership on elected Bahá'í institutions was not initially an issue in Iran. Based on traditional practices, everyone accepted the notion that women were excluded from decision-making institutions, as though it was the intent of the Law revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. As a result of social conditioning, also because of the prejudices that had kept women in a degraded state, women's exclusion from membership on elected Bahá'í institutions in Iran continued for several decades. In his Ten Year global Plan (1953-1963) Shoghi Effendi made the eligibility for election of the Iranian Bahá'í women a goal of that Plan for Iran to achieve. At the end of the first year of that Plan, i.e. during Ridván 1954, women, who until then had the right to elect, for the first time enjoyed the right to be elected as well. Even then the mental block, which considered Iranian women unworthy of serving on elected Bahá'í institutions, made it most difficult for women to be elected. The first woman elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran was Adelaide Sharpe, an American Bahá'í woman serving in Iran. Many Local Assemblies had only one, or no female member, for quite a while after 1954. Therefore, the process of educating the masses about gender equality had to continue much longer. For those who wonder why no Iranian Bahá'í woman was ever appointed a Hand of the Cause of God, or why none has served as a Counselor in the land of Bahá'u'lláh's birth, this should provide at least a partial answer.

While 'Abdu'l-Bahá was preparing the friends in the West for the implementation of the principle of gender equality, He was also laying the ground for its realization in the East. In numerous Tablets, He encouraged the women to emulate the example of the Bahá'í women in America and Europe, and even outdo them in the arena of service. In one of His Tablets we read:

O ye leaves who have attained certitude! In the countries of Europe and America the maidservants of the Merciful have won the prize of excellence and advancement from the arena

of men, and in the fields of teaching and spreading the divine fragrances they have shown a brilliant hand. Soon they will soar like the birds of the Concourse on high in the far corners of the world and will guide the people and reveal to them the divine mysteries. Ye, who are the blessed leaves from the East, should burn more brightly, and engage in spreading the sweet savors of the Lord and in reciting the verses of God. Arise, therefore, and exert yourselves to fulfill the exhortations and counsels of the Blessed Beauty, that all hopes may be realized and that the plain of streams and orchards may become the garden of oneness.<sup>22</sup>

When the initial stirrings of collective consciousness moved the women believers in Tihiran to action, their initiative showed promise when some men of goodwill offered their wholehearted support. At that crucial juncture, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged some western women to go to Iran and extend to the women and their supporters a helping hand.

Although the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh had sparked in the hearts of the women believers the fire of hope and although they knew that one day they would achieve equality of status with men, that glorious future seemed to them very distant. With Tahirih (Qurratu'l-'Ayn) the process of gender equality had begun, but the road to its realization seemed thorny and filled with hazards. The Iranian women needed concrete examples and living role models to turn their dreams into reality; they needed all the support they could get. They had seen the glimmerings of organized Bahá'í community life and activities in Tihiran where men had spontaneously formed institutions that looked after the affairs of the community. They had also witnessed the establishment of a Bahá'í Boys School in 1900 that was successfully educating the boys. They wished to establish a school for the girls. Some even initiated private enterprises with the help of some men of goodwill, but the progress was painfully slow because resources were scarce and community support negligible.

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The first to respond to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's call was Dr. Susan Moody. She settled in Tihran in early 1909, and began working in earnest to improve the health condition of women. She also provided crucial help in establishing a Bahá'í girls school, similar to that of the Tarbíyat Boys School, albeit on a much smaller scale. About a year after her arrival in Tehran, she wrote to the American Bahá'ís in February 1910 and conveyed this joyous news:

...The girls' school is assured. They will start with accommodations for fifty pupils... Please tell any who want to help that it will take only \$1.50 per month to educate a girl. There are many here too poor to pay and this is the way to help lift Persia from her otherwise hopeless condition.<sup>23</sup>

Dr. Moody was instrumental in seeking 'Abdu'l-Bahá's approval for recruiting the services of Ms. Lillian Kappes, an American Bahá'í educator, to teach in the Girls School.

Before going to Iran, Lillian Kappes was aware of the plight of women in that country. She knew that men dominated over the affairs of women and did not think much of their education. She was aware of the challenges that she was going to face in carrying out her work. What she did not know was that her male colleagues would stand in the way of her effectiveness in providing for the education of girls. Fortunately, on her way to Iran, she had met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Switzerland and had been to some degree prepared for the challenges ahead. Nonetheless, at times she found the situation unbearable. For example, she had to administer the girls' school almost single-handedly yet without any autonomy. The school had been initially established as a department of the boys' school and the education committee, composed of male Bahá'ís, was principally concerned with the needs of the boys' school. Miss Kappes was circumscribed in her efforts and could not make much progress. The prolongation of this difficult situation affected her health. In 1916 Dr. Sarah Clock,

another American Bahá'í who had gone to Iran to help Dr. Moody's work, sent a letter to some Bahá'í women in the United States, and disclosed the reality of the situation:

Yesterday Miss K [Kappes] was simply abused by the meeting of 5 men, came home in perfect nervous collapse & was awake all night from sheer nervousness & worry...., Not long ago a tablet came to a Persian here praising Miss K & her work in the school ... she has the moral support of many of the best men, all the women who in an excited meeting all stood y her. ....if Miss Kappes were not a Bahai or not less than a saint she would not have put up with all she has, for five years her hands have been tied, that is they have not allowed her to use her own advanced ideas as to a school. ... some of the good men are entirely with her. They offer to open another school for her & several of the nicest of the girls will teach for nothing.<sup>24</sup>

In a country tightly held in the grip of male domination, where women could not and did not actively participate in any decision-making process, the presence of a few women, who posed a challenge to the traditional way of life, was a mighty tool in exposing the prejudices that had led to women's degraded status. Unlike an early emissary to the west who had informed the nascent Bahá'í community of the United States to exclude women from membership on elected institutions, the American Bahá'í women taught the women in Iran how to achieve equal status with men and prepare to serve with them on Bahá'í institutions. They taught by example that, given opportunities for advancement, women could do as well as their male counterparts. Encouraged by the achievements of their Bahá'í sisters, some Iranian female believers learned to become assertive and to claim their God-given rights. By doing so, they became entangled in a controversial issue for which the generality of men in Iran had no sympathy, even tolerance. When their petitions for equal treatment met resistance, a

group of women wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and complained.<sup>25</sup> And they were not the only ones whose petitioning letters reached 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Some men wrote and complained as well, but the nature of the complaints differed. Women sought equality. Men regarded their perceived superiority a birthright and could not understand the women's demand. Although the texts of the petitioning letters are unavailable, the contents of one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's responses provide enlightening insights. They also show the way that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, through a process of education, prepared both men and women to embrace the principle of gender equality in Iran. While approving "the establishment of a women's assemblage for the promotion of knowledge," He said, "discussions must be confined to educational matters."<sup>26</sup> He further explained: "It should be done in such a way that differences will, day by day, be entirely wiped out, not that, God forbid, it will end in argumentation between men and women."<sup>27</sup> He then provided an example, something that had been done contrary to the dictates of wisdom and it had to do with the veil. He said: "As in the question of the veil, nothing should be done contrary to wisdom."<sup>28</sup> He then exhorted the women:

The individual women should, today, follow a course of action which will be the cause of eternal glory to all womankind, so that all women will be illumined. And that lieth in gathering to learn how to teach, in holding meetings to recite the verses, to offer supplications to the kingdom of the Lord of evident signs, and to institute education for the girls. Ponder the manner in which Jináb-i-Táhirih used to teach. She was free from every concern, and for this reason she was resplendent. Now the world of women should be a spiritual world, not a political one, so that it will be radiant. The women of other nations are all immersed in political matters. Of what benefit is this, and what fruit doth it yield? To the extent that ye can, ye should busy yourselves with spiritual matters which will be conducive to the exaltation of the Word of

God and of the diffusion of His fragrances. Your demeanour should lead to harmony amongst all and to coalescence and the good-pleasure of all...<sup>29</sup>

That the atmosphere between the men and women in Tihiran was tense causing concern, and that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was trying with His loving counsels to calm the situation, in order to hasten the implementation of the principle of gender equality, is evident from what He said next:

I am endeavouring, with Bahá'u'lláh's confirmations and assistance, so to improve the world of the handmaidens that all will be astonished. This progress is intended to be in spirituality, in virtues, in human perfections and in divine knowledge.

To make the women conscious of a unbecoming behaviour, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the situation of the women in America and remarks:

In America, the cradle of women's liberation, women are still debarred from political institutions because they squabble. They are yet to have a member in the House of Representatives.<sup>30</sup>

It must be stated here that 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not spare men from engaging in unbecoming behavior either. During His visit to North America, He related what He had experienced in France, which exposed a similar or worse characteristic in men. He said: "In France I was present at a session of the senate, but the experience was not impressive." After explaining the object of true consultation, He says: "In the parliamentary meeting mentioned, altercation and useless quibbling were frequent; the result, mostly confusion and turmoil; even in one instance a physical encounter took place between two members. It was not consultation but comedy."<sup>31</sup>

## Preparing Bahá'í Communities to Embrace Gender Equality

In His Tablet to the Bahá'í women in Tíhran, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes reference to Bahá'u'lláh addressing the "men of the House of Justice" which suggests that membership of Bahá'í institutions was one of the points covered in the communications He had received. He says: "Also Bahá'u'lláh hath proclaimed: 'O ye men of the House of Justice.'" It is interesting to note that in this Tablet, He does not explain the intent of the Law. Could it be that the process of education in Iran was incomplete and the ground was not yet ready for making the intent of the Law clear? What comes next seems to confirm this conjecture:

Ye need to be calm and composed, so that the work will proceed with wisdom, otherwise there will be such chaos that ye will leave everything and run away. "This newly born babe is traversing in one night the path that needeth a hundred years to tread." In brief, ye should now<sup>32</sup> engage in matters of pure spirituality and not contend with men. 'Abdu'l-Bahá will tactfully take appropriate steps. Be assured. In the end thou wilt thyself exclaim, "This was indeed supreme wisdom!" I appeal to you to obliterate this contention between men and women ....<sup>33</sup>

He ends the Tablet thus:

No one can on his own achieve anything. 'Abdu'l-Bahá must be well pleased and assist.<sup>34</sup>

The theme of gender equality was time and again addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His travels in North America and Europe. His utterances have been compiled and published in "The Promulgation of Universal Peace," "Paris Talks," "Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy", and so forth. His statements on the subject have been included in the Compilation on Women. I quote here one statement, which

describes vividly the status of women at the time of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, and the progress made thereafter:

The woman of the East has progressed. Formerly in India, Persia and throughout the Orient, she was not considered a human being. Certain Arab tribes counted their women in with the livestock. In their language the noun for woman also meant donkey; that is, the same name applied to both and a man's wealth was accounted by the number of these beasts of burden he possessed. The worst insult one could hurl at a man was to cry out, "Thou woman!"

From the moment Bahá'u'lláh appeared, this changed. He did away with the idea of distinction between the sexes, proclaiming them equal in every capacity.

In former times it was considered wiser that woman should not know how to read or write; she should occupy herself only with drudgery. She was very ignorant. Bahá'u'lláh declares the education of woman to be of more importance than that of man. If the mother be ignorant, even if the father have great knowledge, the child's education will be at fault, for education begins with the milk. A child at the breast is like a tender branch that the gardener can train as he wills.

The East has begun to educate its women. Some there are in Persia who have become liberated through this cause, whose cleverness and eloquence the 'ulamá cannot refute. Many of them are poets. They are absolutely fearless....

I hope for a like degree of progress among the women of Europe – that each may shine like unto a lamp; that they may cry out the proclamation of the kingdom; that they may truly assist the men; nay, that 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. It would be a cause of great joy for me to see such women. This is useful work; by it woman will enter into the kingdom. Otherwise, there will be no results.<sup>35</sup>

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in the United States, many newspaper reporters and journalists interviewed Him. In some interviews He responded to questions about gender equality and woman suffrage. Almost a century ago, a newspaper in San Francisco published an interview titled "Abdul Baha Suffrage Advocate – Sex Equality Need for Progress." One of the questions the interviewer asked was "How about woman suffrage?" 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded:

The world of humanity is possessed of two wings, one represented by the male, the other by the female. Both must be strong in order that the world of humanity may fly. Equality of rights and prerogatives of men and women is finding foothold in America faster than in other parts. Until suffrage is established, the body-politic will not achieve its progress. Women are the first educators of men. Hence womankind must be educated until they reach the level of man.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

The principle of gender equality revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the mid-Nineteenth Century is an essential prerequisite for the realization of the unity of humankind, which is the ultimate goal of His revelation. The principle was revealed when the world was steeped in prejudices that had subjugated women and kept them under the thumb of the authority of men. To restore to women the rights denied them for many centuries, it was crucial to educate Bahá'í communities and

allow them sufficient time to gradually embrace the principle of gender equality. This process began on a wide scale during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and gained momentum when some awaked women questioned the validity of the status quo which the generality of the male believers wished to maintain. The strides taken to overcome traditional barriers and gender biases which began during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry have been more successful in countries where women have had the freedom to exercise their rights and prove their worth. The process is destined to continue until full equality is achieved on a worldwide scale.

NOTES

- 1 Ibrahim Kheirallah arrived in New York City on 20 December 1892. (The Bahá'í Faith in America, Vol. 1, p. 26.)
- 2 Mírzá Asadu'llah, a seasoned believer from Isfahan, was related to 'Abdu'l-Baha through marriage. He was married to a younger sister of Minirih Khanum, 'Abdu'l-Baha's wife. Mírzá Asadu'llah lived in the Holy Land with his family. His son, Dr. Ameen Farid, served as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's translator during His travels in the west. He later broke the Covenant and caused the spiritual demise of His parents and sister.
- 3 At the turn of the twentieth century, Mr. Anton Haddad, an Arabic-speaking believer living in the United States began work on translating to English the text of the Kitab-i-Aqdas. His translation was informal and never published.
- 4 Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book, K 30
- 5 Ibid, K 52
- 6 For further information, see the initial chapters of The Bahá'í Bahá'í Faith in America, Vol. 2.
- 7 Corinne True, Faithful Handmaid of 'Abdu'l-Baha, pp. 30–31
- 8 Ibid, p. 31
- 9 Ibid, p. 32
- 10 Women. Comp. UK Bahá'í Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990 edition, #14.
- 11 Ibid, #19
- 12 In the Compilation on Women a footnote appears after above Tablet which reads:  
"From other extracts it is evident that the limitation of membership to men applies only to the Universal House of Justice, and not to the National and Local Houses of Justice."
- 13 The Concise Oxford Dictionary.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Women, #2
- 16 Corinne True, p. 32
- 17 Women, #15
- 18 Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book, K 42.

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- 19 The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Baha. US Bahá'íBahá'í Publishing Trust 1971 edition, p. 14
- 20 Women, # 31.
- 21 Kitab-i-Aqdas, K 30.
- 22 Women, #100
- 23 Start of the West 1:2:11, quoted in "The Interdependence of Bahá'íBahá'í Communities, Services of North American Bahá'íBahá'í Women to Iran", The Journal of Bahá'íBahá'í Studies, 4:1:25.
- 24 In Iran. Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History series, Vol. 3, p. 190, quoted in "The Interdependence of Bahá'íBahá'í Communities", The Journal of Bahá'íBahá'í Studies, 4:1:31.
- 25 Compared with the number of men who wrote to 'Abdu'l-Baha, the number of women was negligible. For that reason, the number of Tablets revealed in honour of Iranian Bahá'íBahá'í women is far less than those revealed in honour of the men.
- 26 Women, #13.
- 27 Ibid
- 28 Ibid. ]Bahá'í men and women did not meet together in one place. To enable everyone to enjoy the program, women sat in an adjacent room separated from the men's room by a curtain, or a wall. To break away with the tradition of segregation based on gender, at a meeting attended by visitors from the west, the curtain was drawn back. Startled by this action, some men took offense and reported the event to 'Abdu'l-Baha.
- 29 Women, # 13.
- 30 Ibid. When 'Abdu'l-Baha was in the United States, women did not yet have the right of vote. They gained the right in 1920.
- 31 Consultation. Comp. #20.
- 32 Emphasis added.
- 33 Women, #13.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 'Abdu'l-Baha on Divine Philosophy, pages 81–3
- 36 San Francisco Examiner, Friday 4 October 1912