

Women and Wisdom in Scripture

Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani

Gender equality was a far off dream before mid-nineteenth century. People around the world, though separated in the past by natural barriers and diverse in culture, race, language, belief and creed, agreed on one thing: the way they regarded and treated women as subordinates to men. The wellbeing of the male half of humanity had occupied center place even in scripture and adherence to tradition made unthinkable any challenge to what appeared the 'norm'. Women lived under the thumb of men's authority. To justify the subjection of women, men resorted to 'vain imaginings' and 'idle fancies',¹ quoting scripture in support of their superiority. The belief that gender inequality was sanctioned by religion and men's superiority had the support of scripture led to untold inequities perpetrated against one half of humanity.

The inability to recognize the essential principle of the oneness of humanity, coupled with proclivity to promote fantasy, caused falsehood to appear as reality and concealed the truth of gender equality under layers of ambiguity. The uneducated masses, for their understanding of the letter and spirit of religious teachings, depended almost exclusively on the privileged few, who in the past reserved for themselves the right to education and the authority to interpret scripture. The use of biased language, a conventional medium for conveying spiritual and social laws, enabled men to hold on to their presumed superiority over women. The glimmers of hope that gender equality would at last become a tangible reality penetrated human conscience on a massive scale when the Báb

made His mission known in 1844, followed by Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of His mission in 1863. The creative forces generated by the rapid succession of the twin Manifestations of God one hundred and seventy years ago, created a fresh impulse in the world and produced reverberations everywhere, particularly in lands where freedom has been enjoyed as a right.

In this paper the treatment of women in religion, the direct and indirect influence of the Babi and Bahá'í Faiths in raising awareness about women's plight and transforming attitudes towards them across the globe, the role of linguistic biases in degrading women's status, the role of wisdom in preparing the ground for gender equality, and finally the need for vigilance to prevent past shortcomings from infiltrating our way of thinking and behaving will be discussed.

Religion has been intricately linked to the degradation of women's status since time immemorial. In many parts of the world it is still the case. Any voice raised in favor of the restoration of women's fundamental rights is silenced by opponents, who invariably quote from scripture in defense of their distorted views about women. To achieve the goal of subjugating women, religious leaders realized that the key to their success was keeping women ignorant. For that reason attempts to free women from the bondage of ignorance through education is even today fiercely rejected in countries where religious fanaticism reigns. Those who go against traditional practices and seek an education are regarded as threat and their perceived acts of transgression are punishable by death. Evidences of this skewed belief are still manifest among fanatical and radical adherents of certain religious sects in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Africa. They oppose the establishment of schools for girls and threaten the lives of young women who seek education to advance their situation in countries where religious fanaticism has been gaining support.

Bahá'u'lláh warns the *“Oppressors on Earth”* to withdraw their hands from tyranny and has *“pledged not to forgive any man’s injustice. This is My covenant.”* He says, *“which I have irrevocably decreed in the preserved tablet and sealed it with My seal of glory.”* [HW P64] He admonishes His followers: *“The friends of God must be adorned with the ornament of justice, equity, kindness and love. As they do not allow themselves to be the object of cruelty and transgression, in like manner they should not allow such tyranny to visit the handmaidens of God.”*² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has acknowledged the injustices perpetrated on the basis of gender: *“Divine justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other in the eyes of Heaven.”* [PT 161]

Tyranny, injustice, oppression and inflicting harm on vulnerable human beings have ever existed in the world. The most glaring of all, however, has been the kind affecting more than one half of the human race. This kind of tyranny has been committed not only by primitive men against women, but also by the civilized; not only by the ignorant, but also by the erudite; not only by the ungodly, but also by the people of faith. The question is why? This kind of tyranny prevented women for eons from fulfilling their preordained measure. This kind of inequity has been by far the most insidious committed in the world. It has been the widest in scope and the longest in duration.

It is insidious because it has been ongoing forever and affected women at the family level, which is the most basic unit of society, to organizations at the highest level and everything in between. It has been the longest in duration because no one knows when it began and it is yet to end worldwide. The victims have endured maltreatment for countless generations not only in the hand of their enemies but also the ones near and dear to them, including the men they bore and reared. This is indeed the saddest human drama played on the world stage for countless centuries. How did it happen and why did it take so long to address the injustices? Why was humanity so oblivious

of women's plight and why it took so long to introduce remedies, to right the wrong? Speculations about how it happened are many and determining its genesis is most difficult, but why it took so long is not difficult to ascertain. Since the topic is women and wisdom in scripture, the focus will be limited to the recordings of holy books, though women have been oppressed within and outside the confines of religion, which indicates that however it started, religion did not remain immune from its effects.

Treatment of Women in Religion

One of the areas of human life governed by religious law is that of "relations among individuals and between individual and society."³ To accomplish the object of effecting "*a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions*", [KI 240] religion takes into consideration the requirements of time, the capacity of the people it directs and their potential for progress within a specific timeframe. This human element has made it necessary for religion to use 'wisdom' in achieving the aim of spiritualizing human beings and guiding them to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. To achieve this, judging by the recordings of holy books, divine revelations in the past seem to have focused attention and effort mostly on the male segment of humanity and concerned themselves primarily with their interest. "*In former ages*", 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "*men enjoyed ascendancy over women because bodily might reigned supreme and the spirit was subject to its dominion.*"⁴ Constrained by the requirements of time, which regarded physical strength and forceful nature the criteria of superiority, a narrative granting men authority to rule over women and requiring women to be subservient to them was developed, promoted, widely accepted and perpetuated for many thousands of years. This narrative stayed current until mid-nineteenth century when the Báb made His

Mission known, followed by Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. Their Advents revolutionized the affairs of humankind, accelerated the process of its coming of age and drastically changed the fortunes of womankind.

Women are endowed by Providence with attributes necessary to bear and rear future generations. As nurturers and protectors of life, they give of themselves to help fetuses grow into perfect human beings. They sacrifice their own interest that vulnerable infants may survive and flourish. As first educators of humankind they have amazing capacity for tenderheartedness, patience, forbearance, self-abnegation and love in its purest form. These qualities are inherent in men as well but it takes more effort and inducement to bring them to the fore. The focus of scripture in the past on the edification of men, therefore, may have been a requirement of wisdom. The perceived preferential treatment of men was however exploited to the full by those who reserved for themselves the right to interpret scripture. They put women down at every opportunity, pushed them into oblivion, deprived them of their human rights, in short enslaved them. To hold on to what they perceived to be their prerogative, when the founder of a subsequent religion introduced improvement in the status of women, they objected vehemently and did everything in their power, including misinterpretation of scripture and imposition of arbitrary restrictions until women lost the ground they had gained and their status became even worse than what it was previously.

References in the scriptures of the past to the nobility of human soul and spiritual goodness of all did not establish gender equality, neither succeeded in averting the sufferings inflicted on women, because they were overshadowed by references pointing to their status being inferior to men. In fact no specific and categorical evidence is found in religions predating the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh's revelations advocating the equality of the rights of women and men. The presence of

references to the inferior status of women in scripture gave way to the maltreatment of women in religion.

An examination of scriptures of the three religions we are most familiar with shed light on this phenomenon. The first chapter of the book of Genesis⁵ confirms that both men and women were created in the image and likeness of God, enjoyed equal status and were given similar functions to perform: “*And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it...*” [Genesis 1:26-28]

The structure of the passage is intriguing. The same thing could have been said in a simpler fashion. Its complexity lent it to misinterpretation and led to inequality of men and women. We turn to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for clarification of the term ‘man’ in the above passage: “*The biblical statement ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ does not mean that woman was not created. The image and likeness of God apply to her as well.*” [PUP 74] He then explains: “*In Persian and Arabic there are two distinct words translated into English as man: one meaning man and woman collectively, the other distinguishing man as male from woman the female. The first word and its pronoun are generic, collective; the other is restricted to the male. This is the same in Hebrew.*” He adds: “*To accept and observe a distinction which God has not intended in creation is ignorance and superstition...*” [PUP 74] In this statement ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms the causes of gender inequality being ignorance and superstition. These words are synonyms of ‘vain imaginings’ and ‘idle fancies’, which Bahá’u’lláh has used to highlight the causes of inequality.

Men and women might have initially enjoyed the equality that the first chapter of the book of Genesis confirms. If that was ever the case, it is not known how long it lasted, for no

record of it exists. The process of men gaining ascendancy over women seems to have been gradual. The pretext for the change is recorded in the second and third chapters of the book of Genesis. To justify women's subjugation, an imaginative and elaborate scenario was contrived. In brief, the story claims that Adam was first formed and Eve was created from his rib. Eve was deceived by a serpent and ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree, of which Adam ate as well, fully aware that he was disobeying the instructions of God. When he was called to account for his transgression, he blamed Eve, his wife. As a result, she was made to suffer the severest punishment: "*Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.*" [Genesis 3:16] Thus was sealed the fate of women for millennia and tyranny against them reigned unchecked.

About the contrived story of creation 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

If we take this story in its apparent meaning, according to the interpretation of the masses, it is indeed extraordinary. The intelligence cannot accept it, affirm it, or imagine it; for such arrangements, such details, such speeches and reproaches are far from being those of an intelligent man, how much less of the Divinity ... Therefore, this story of Adam and Eve who ate from the tree, and their expulsion from Paradise, must be thought of simply as a symbol. [SAQ 123]

Sadly the story was taken literally and led to an era of tyranny and injustice engulfing one half of humanity. Even today girls are prevented from going to school in some parts of the world, young women seeking an education are shot in the head,⁶ and it is all done in the name of religion! A story so extraordinary in detail that according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá "*intelligence cannot accept it, affirm it, or imagine it*", found currency among people who consider themselves intelligent and

has been used to impose arbitrary restrictions on one half of the human race.

The Books of Moses, probably the oldest religious documents in existence, contain many inconsistencies. The account of the creation of the first pair of human beings is a major inconsistency and its effect on the cause of womanhood has been devastating. It is not known how exactly the inconsistency occurred. Each of the existing schools probably taught its own version, which did not agree in every detail, before they were consolidated into one. To achieve consensus, the consolidators seem to have retained the inconsistencies they could not resolve; the major issue being the status of women which by then had suffered irretrievable setback. The appearance of the two contradictory stories about the creation of Adam and Eve in close proximity in the initial chapters of Genesis “either laid the foundation for degrading women’s status in religion or gave religious support to discriminatory views already in circulation. It is noteworthy that the distorted creation story was widely accepted and, together with the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, was used by theologians and priests in a way that had an adverse effect on the popular view of women’s inherent nature.”⁷

The Manifestations of God who came after Moses introduced measures to improve the status of women. However, before the Advents of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, none went as far as declaring gender equality, no doubt as a consideration of wisdom, for gender inequality was so entrenched that the pronouncement of equality would have shocked those that most needed religion and would have kept men outside the sphere of religious influence. Evidence shows that whatever improvement was made by subsequent Divine Educators, was lost almost immediately after He passed away.

Jesus Christ, during His ministry, accepted women into His presence and treated them kindly. No indication can be found in the statements He made that He ever put women down or

degraded them in any way. On the contrary, He elevated them at every opportunity. Women did well early in Christianity. Mary Magdalene, titled by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Pride of Men arose with astonishing firmness and steadfastness after Christ’s crucifixion. Through genuine love for the teachings of Jesus she provided such inspired guidance that became the cause of steadfastness and enthusiasm of His disciples.⁸ Walking in her footsteps the early Christian women did well until St. Paul in his letters introduced restrictions to check their advancement. The justification for the restrictions was the ‘extraordinary’ story of the creation of Adam and Eve, as recorded in the second and third chapters of the book of Genesis:

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety. [1 Tim. 2:11-15]

The tone and contents of St. Paul’s letters provide a window into how early Christian men viewed the activities of the women believers. The letters also disclose the women’s success, especially in giving talks and teaching Christianity, which caused alarm and disturbed some men who, instead of being inspired by the women’s example, complained and expressed concern. The situation must have been serious or St. Paul, who advocated a break with the past, would not have upheld the sanctions that had kept women backward. Sentences such as “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection” and “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” reveal how strongly rooted was the prejudice against women. Another letter from St. Paul, which justifies the requirement for women to cover their heads,

confirms his conviction that only man, the male, was created in the image and glory of God, and that woman was of the man:

... a man indeed ought not to cover his head, for as much as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither is the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. [1 Cor. 11:7-9]

By sanctioning old restrictions on women, St. Paul revived the contrived story of creation and deprived women, so soon after Christ's crucifixion, of their God-given rights. The question then is: Why was appeasing the men so important and why women had to continue to pay the price of appeasement? Did wisdom have anything to do with it? Humanity had not yet come of age and had to be treated according to its capacity. Physical force was the criterion for superiority and men were physically strong. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "*In former ages, men enjoyed ascendancy over women because bodily might reigned supreme and the spirit was subject to its dominion.*"⁹ No wonder then that the answer to men's immaturity was pacifying their aggressive nature in order to spiritualize them under the canopy of religion. Fortitude has been the mark of women's strength. Their long suffering has helped the process of realizing the goal of spiritualizing mankind. Now that the era of justice has dawned presaging humanity's coming of age, the restoration of their rights is at hand.

Prophet Muhammad introduced a number of measures to upgrade the status of women, which had steadily eroded for countless centuries before His revelation. However He, too, revealed laws commensurate with requirements of the time and limitations of the people among whom He appeared. For example, He reaffirms that man was first created and out of him was created his wife: "*O men, fear your Lord, who hath created you out of one man, and out of him created his wife, and from the two hath multiplied many men and women.*" In

the same passage He admonishes His followers to “*fear God by whom ye beseech one another; and respect women, who have borne you, for God is watching over you.*”¹⁰ In fact He came very close to advocating gender equality when He said: “*The women ought also to behave towards their husbands in like manner as their husbands should behave towards them according to what is just.*” Regrettably He added: “*... but the men ought to have a superiority over them...*”¹¹ Another verse of the Quran says: “*Men shall have the preeminence above women, because of those advantages wherein God hath caused the one of them to excel the other, and for that which they expend of their substance in maintaining their wives.*”¹² Here again we see how popular traditional belief and people’s immaturity made it impossible for gender equality to become a guiding principle. Can the role wisdom played here in giving men preeminence above women be denied?

The improvements that the Prophet Muhammad had made in the status of women during His lifetime gradually lost their efficacy due to misinterpretations of the ‘ulama, who imposed severe restrictions on women. As a result, women continued to suffer inhuman treatment in the name of religion. Referring to their status before the revelation of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

The status of woman in former times was exceedingly deplorable, for it was the belief of the Orient that it was best for woman to be ignorant. It was considered preferable that she should not know reading or writing in order that she might not be informed of events in the world. Woman was considered to be created for rearing children and attending to the duties of the household. If she pursued educational course, it was deemed contrary to chastity; hence women were prisoners of the household. The houses did not even have windows opening upon the outside world. [PUP 166, emphasis added]

Women are seldom mentioned in Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. What has been handed down in both word and practice point to women's subordinate status in communities adhering to these religions. (For cited examples, see *Hope for a Global Ethic* by Brian D. Lepard, pp. 104, 106, 107.) Women were also regarded inferior to men in Zoroastrianism. References to them are hard to find, because Zoroastrian scripture is unavailable in a language readily understood even by ordinary Zoroastrians. That no Zoroastrian woman prior to 2011 held a position of authority is an indication that gender equality was probably not a tenet of the religion. In 2011 the Zoroastrian Council of Priests in Tehran (Anjoman-e-Mobedan) "announced that for the first time in the history of Iran and of the Zoroastrian communities worldwide women had joined the group of *mobeds* (priests) in Iran as *mobedyars* (women priests); the women hold official certificates and perform the lower religious functions and can initiate people into the religion."¹³

In a number of His Tablets 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of the abasement suffered by women in the East, which confirms that in the drama of men-women relationship, selfishness and insatiable thirst for control triumphed over justice and fairness, leaving one half of humanity at the mercy of the other half. He says: "*Formerly in India, Persia and throughout the Orient, she was not considered a human being. Certain Arab tribes counted their women in with the live stock.*"¹⁴

It took humanity several thousand years to arrive at a point in its maturity necessary for the recognition of a simple truth: that having been created in the image and likeness of God, men and women alike are the revealers of the names and attributes of the Creator and enjoy equal rights. However, without the generating influence of a divine revelation it would have been impossible to bring about meaningful change in the psyche and attitude of human beings, to embrace this truth. Since scripture was responsible initially through the use of language in creating ambiguity concerning the status of women, only scripture

could put it right and produce a favorable atmosphere for its enforcement. The morn of administering justice in the world finally dawned in the nineteenth century when Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed unambiguously the principle of gender equality as a prerequisite for establishing unity of humankind, the pivotal principle of His revelation:

*All should know, and in this regard attain the splendors of the sun of certitude, and be illumined thereby: Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God. The Dawning-Place of the Light of God sheddeth its radiance upon all with the same effulgence. Verily God created women for men, and men for women. The most beloved of people before God are the most steadfast and those who have surpassed others in their love for God, exalted be His glory.*¹⁵

He further confirmed that distinctions have been lifted from between men and women:

*Praised be God, the Pen of the Most High hath lifted distinctions from between His servants and handmaidens, and, through His consummate favours and all-encompassing mercy, hath conferred upon all a station and rank on the same plane. He 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.*¹⁶

He reiterated the removal of all distinctions and confirmed that believers, regardless of their gender, are regarded on the same plane:

In this Day the Hand of divine grace hath removed all distinctions. The servants of God and His handmaidens are regarded on the same plane. Blessed is the servant who hath attained unto that which God hath decreed,

*and likewise the leaf moving in accordance with the breezes of His will.*¹⁷

Measures Taken to Establish Gender Equality

Bahá'u'lláh did not only reveal the principle of gender equality, He also provided for its implementation. The right to education is high among the provisions He has revealed, education that is universal and compulsory. One of the reasons gender inequality went unchallenged in the past was women's inability to know for themselves what the holy books had said. As a result, they were unable to go to the source and enquire from the centre of authority when things were vague or appeared prejudicial and discriminatory. They operated in the dark – the darkness of ignorance – and paid a high price for following blindly what had been contrived. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*... It is incumbent upon the girls of this glorious era to be fully versed in the various branches of knowledge, in sciences and the arts and all the wonders of this preeminent time, that they may then educate their children and train them from their earliest days in the ways of perfection.*¹⁸

He strongly refutes the argument that women's capabilities do not match those of men's:

*It has been objected by some that woman is not equally capable with man and that she is deficient by creation. This is pure imagination. The difference in capability between man and woman is due entirely to opportunity and education. Heretofore woman has been denied the right and privilege of equal development. If equal opportunity be granted her, there is no doubt she would be the peer of man. History will evidence this. In past ages noted women have arisen in the affairs of nations and surpassed men in their accomplishments....*¹⁹

He advises the friends:

Devote ye particular attention to the school for girls, for the greatness of this wondrous Age will be manifested as a result of progress in the world of women. This is why ye observe that in every land the world of women is on the march, and this is due to the impact of the Most Great manifestation, and the power of the teachings of God.²⁰

To fulfill the object of transforming humanity and inspiring its adherents to organize their affairs according to a newly revealed order, divine revelation pays close attention to the capacity of people and requirements of the time it is destined to stay relevant. As discussed earlier, recordings of Holy Books indicate that men and women were created equal and given responsibility to multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it. However humanity's proclivity to move away from the spirit of religious teachings and its tendency to slide back to the way of life to which it was attached previously caused it to come in line with divine teachings with stories and myths it had inherited from earlier generations. Efforts to right the wrong and to restore balance took several thousand years and culminated in Bahá'u'lláh declaring categorically that distinctions have been removed and gender equality restored. However, what had taken root in the hearts and minds could not be obliterated overnight, the ground had to be made ready for its worldwide implementation. This colossal task fell on 'Abdu'l-Bahá to accomplish. This topic has been dealt with in detail in a paper by this author, titled "Preparing Bahá'ís in the East and the West to Embrace Gender Equality".²¹ One of the Tablets discussed in that paper is the one 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed in response to Corinne True who had asked about the exclusion of women from membership of the Universal House of Justice. Contrary to what the generality of the friends believe, He did not say women's exclusion from membership of the House of Justice was for a reason. He said it was "*for a wisdom of Lord*

God's which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon." But before addressing the question, He emphasized:

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 a handmaid, ardent and devoted, hath, within the sheltering shade of Bahá, proved superior to the men, and surpassed the famous of the earth.

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. [SWAB 79-80]

Gender equality has always been a spiritual principle. Bahá'u'lláh has confirmed, "*Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God.*"²² The mere reiteration of that principle would not have gained women equal rights with men, as attested by historical records, but the lifting of distinctions from between women and men and granting them all a station on the same plane did. What is different in His dispensation is that gender equality is also a social principle with vast implications for womanhood and humanity in general. Another point in need of clarification is this: Initially the friends even in North America, in keeping with their traditional upbringing and mindset, assumed that women were barred from serving on all Houses of Justice, local, national and international.²³ After a period of painstaking education, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained the intent of the law, which made it

possible for women to serve on all institutions of the Faith, appointed and elected, except that of the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'í women have served in the elected institutions of the Faith many years before other women in the United States gained the right to serve as elected representatives of the inhabitants of that country.

When the Tablet addressed to Corinne True reached its recipient and the contents became known, even though 'Abdu'l-Bahá had confirmed women's exclusion from the membership of the "House of Justice", it was not sufficient. Some men, among them a prominent Bahá'í in the United States, complained because 'Abdu'l-Bahá had said: "*How many a handmaid, ardent and devoted, hath, within the sheltering shade of Bahá, proved superior to the men, and surpassed the famous of the earth.*" 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet revealed in honour of Thornton Chase speaks for itself:

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.²⁴

In lands where religious fanaticism and gender bias against women were extremely strong and impenetrable – Iran being one of them – the process of preparing the community took much longer and women's membership on Bahá'í institutions materialized in 1954, three years before the passing of Shoghi Effendi.

This writer heard about the exclusion of women from membership of the House of Justice before entering primary school, many years before the institution of the Universal House of Justice came into being. At that time in Iran Bahá'í women were not yet eligible to serve even on local and national elected bodies.²⁵ Therefore it did not come as a surprise. As I grew older, I heard men speculate on what could be the reason for exclusion. I must admit most speculations were offensive even to a very young girl that I was then. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet brought to me a measure of relief and comfort. Contrary to speculations, He had given no reason for women's exclusion but spoken of "*a wisdom of Lord God's*", which He said, "*will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon.*" Armed with this 'discovery', I challenged the validity of the speculations I had heard repeatedly. Some speculators maintained that reason and wisdom were synonyms! I looked up the definition of the two words and found out the difference.

Further research into the process that led to the degradation of women's status in religion opened the door to a new understanding of the term 'wisdom', especially the kind that human beings have been given the capacity to fathom. The kind of wisdom that 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks about is that which "*will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon.*" It means that all have the ability to see and understand, unless completely blind. This is the kind of wisdom that all Divine Educators have used to improve women's status without startling the male population and arousing their vehement objection. If not seen in this light, scripture would be implicated in causing women their plight. Prejudices against women were so entrenched, lack of education so widespread, and misinterpretation of scripture so rampant that their status deteriorated steadily until humanity became the recipient of a revelation, which has revolutionized its affairs and set in motion a process leading to the maturity of the human race. 'Abdu'l-Bahá used supreme wisdom in the implementation of the principle of gender equality. He said this Himself in a

Tablet addressed to a group of women in Tihiran, who wished to see the principle in action before members of the community were ready to embrace it:

I am endeavouring, with Bahá'u'lláh's confirmations and assistance, so to improve the world of the handmaidens that all will be astonished ... 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 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....

He closed the Tablet with these words: "No one can on his own achieve anything. 'Abdu'l-Bahá must be well pleased and assist."²⁶

'Abdu'l-Bahá engaged in a process of educating the believers to embrace gender equality.²⁷ The insurmountable obstacles in the way were different in nature and magnitude in the East and West. He gently addressed the objections and refuted them with loving compassion. Regarding the argument that woman has been created deficient, He says:

It has been objected by some that woman is not equally capable with man and that she is deficient by creation. This is pure imagination. The difference in capability between man and woman is due entirely to opportunity and education. [PUP 133]

The Role of Language in Perpetuating Women's Plight

The opening lines of US Declaration of Independence reiterates in essence what the first chapter of the book of Genesis affirms but leaves out the clarification about both male and female having been created in God's' image:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.²⁸

The word 'men' appears twice in the passage: the first is lower case, the second capitalized. The one is probably general, the other specific. Who knows which is which, for when pronounced they sound alike. Also the 'consent of the governed' is determined through voting. Since the American women did not have the right to vote when the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776, it is assumed that their consent or lack thereof was of no consequence. No wonder then that US Declaration of Independence did not achieve gender equality. It was through civil liberty and education that the eyes of women were opened and the fire of longing for emancipation blazoned in their hearts. Some women became anti-slavery activists and campaigned in earnest for its abolition. Having been oppressed and subjugated for countless centuries, they understood what slavery entailed and how abhorrent a practice it was. One of the women activists, Lucretia Mott, a Quaker minister, attended as a delegate the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London, England in 1840, but was refused the right, along with other female delegates attending the Convention, to speak. In fact they were asked to leave. The refusal to seat the women delegates was the motivating factor for Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the

wife of another delegate from the United States, to get together and discuss the need for holding “a convention to discuss the rights of women.”²⁹ That convention took place in Seneca Falls, New York, in the summer of 1948 at about the same time the Conference of Badasht was held.

To deliberate on the plight of women and propose changes to mitigate the effect of maltreatment and injustices they had suffered, the gathering produced a document known as the Declaration of Sentiments, which stipulates: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness....”

The simultaneous occurrence of these two events in venues thousands of miles apart with the theme of breaking away from traditions of the past, as well as the role that women played in the proceedings of both are truly astounding. Although the agenda of the two conferences was rejection of the status quo, the outcome was very different. Those assembled at Seneca Falls forged ahead with their aims. Fully cognizant of the role that linguistic biases had played in the degradation of women’s status in religion, they took measures to arrest the process and right the wrong. The organizer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, financed the production of a women’s bible. She also financed the work of the women activists.

At Badasht Conference only one woman participated in the proceedings. She was known as Qurratu’l-Ayn and became better known as Tahirih (the Pure). She was one of the central players at the Conference. To declare the dawn of a New Day and the emancipation of women through the Bab’s Advent, she appeared unveiled in an assemblage of men, who confessed belief in the Báb but were utterly unprepared to see the unveiled face of a woman adherent of the nascent Faith. By removing her veil, something strictly imposed on women by Islamic tradition and upheld fiercely by religious leaders,

Tahirih proclaimed the dawn of a new Era and the invalidation of traditions that had kept women backward. She was sentenced to death for espousing the nascent Cause and executed in 1852, the year Bahá'u'lláh received intimation of His Mission while imprisoned in the Siyah Chal (Black Pit) of Tihran. Shoghi Effendi refers to “this great Babi heroine” as “the first woman suffrage martyr, who, at her death, turning to the one in whose custody she had been placed, had boldly declared: ‘You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.’” [GPB 75]

What prompted Tahirih at Badasht and some North American women at Seneca Falls to go against the norm was directly related to the maltreatment of women and the denial of their God-given rights. Slavery and women’s subjugation are kindred subjects. They are ancient practices, heinous and oppressive. However, the two differ in one respect: Slavery became a burden on man’s conscience long before did the maltreatment of women.

Those desirous of having power over women and controlling their affairs perceive gender inequality as a matter sanctioned in scripture. Keeping women ignorant and under the thumb of the authority of men is one thing all religious zealots agree to uphold. To give credence to their misinterpretations, they use linguistic nuances as the vehicle. To prevent women from recognizing and taking action against maltreatment, they have made it look as though God has intended men to be superior in creation. As gender inequality is seemingly based on scripture, its eradication only scripture could sanction. Granting women equality with men through legislation is insufficient. Even the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights,³⁰ adopted by UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948, a hundred years after the conferences held at Badasht and Seneca Falls³¹ has been ineffective to restore to women their rights in countries ruled by religious law. Moreover, whatever is given at will can be taken away at will, and examples of this are

provided repeatedly in history. A case in point is the situation of women in Iran before and after the Islamic Revolution.

In North America, the cradle of freedom, women rights activists have been unable to have the equal rights amendment ratified. The amendment to the US Constitution designed to guarantee equal rights for women was first proposed in 1923. Although it passed both houses of Congress by 1972, sufficient number of state legislatures did not vote in favor it by the deadlines the Congress had set. The opposition was based on a number of reasons, traditional gender roles pre-eminent among them. As a result, it has not yet become the law. Further efforts are being made at the federal and state levels to have it adopted. During His travels in the West, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke repeatedly about the subject. The following is an example:

Neither sex is superior to the other in the sight of God. Why then should one sex assert the inferiority of the other, withholding just rights and privileges as though God had given His authority for such a course of action? [PT 161]

The underlying purpose of divine revelations, Bahá’u’lláh says, “*hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High*” [GWB 157]. To educate humanity, the Revealers of religion have had to use the medium of language, which like everything in life is subject to change. The earliest religious records that have survived, regardless of how they were worded in the original language, have been translated to a language highly prejudicial to the cause of womanhood, as discussed earlier. Using masculine terms, such as ‘man’, ‘men’ and pronouns, such as ‘he’, ‘his’ and ‘him’ indistinctively regardless of whether they refer to man, the male, or to humanity in general have worked to women’s disadvantage. The realization of gender equality, a vital aspect of the principle of unity of humankind, requires

dealing with this dilemma, which has been a major cause of the degradation of women since time immemorial.

The capacity of language to convey meanings other than those traditionally assigned to words has been exploited in every respect but that of gender equality. The time seems propitious to let the use of unbiased language rid humanity of the remaining barriers intervening between it and the full realization of gender equality.

Bahá'u'lláh's writings are revealed in both Persian and Arabic. These two languages are very different in the way the pronouns are used. Unlike Persian, a non-gender-specific language, which uses the same pronoun for God and third singular person whether man or woman, Arabic is gender specific, it uses different pronouns when referring to a man or a woman. It also uses the plural of masculine pronoun for referring to humanity in general.³²

The problem of using masculine pronoun whether it refers to God, to man specifically or to humanity in general is accentuated when Persian Writings are translated to English, because all non-gender-specific Persian terms and pronouns are changed to masculine. Since translations to all other languages are based on the English approved version, this linguistic bias is promoted and perpetuated throughout the Bahá'í world, making it most difficult, if not impossible, to control their ramifications throughout the dispensation.

Looking deeper into challenges that lack of linguistic clarity poses for translators of Bahá'í Writings provides us with valuable insights. In a Tablet revealed in Persian regarding the membership of the Supreme Tribunal, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

... the question of universal peace, about which Bahá'u'lláh says that the Supreme Tribunal must be established: although the League of Nations has been brought into existence, yet it is incapable of establishing universal peace. But the Supreme Tribunal which

Bahá'u'lláh has described will fulfill this sacred task with the utmost might and power. And His plan is this: that the national assemblies of each country and nation – that is to say parliaments – should elect two or three persons who are the choicest men of that nation, and are well informed concerning international laws and the relations between governments and aware of the essential needs of the world of humanity in this day... From among these people the members of the Supreme Tribunal will be elected, and all mankind will thus have a share therein, for every one of these delegates is fully representative of his nation... [SWAB 305]

After the English translation of the Tablet was published in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* and quoted in the compilation on Peace, the phrase 'the choicest men of that nation' was found to be inaccurate. In the original Persian 'Abdu'l-Bahá says 'the choicest persons', not 'the choicest men'. When the mistranslation was brought to the attention of the Universal House of Justice, it instructed the responsible department to look into the matter. After thorough investigation, the phrase was changed to 'the choicest of that nation', which is not gender specific. Publishing Trusts were then informed to make the correction. It is not known how many made the correction and informed the friends, who had purchased earlier versions. Meanwhile, unaware of this development, the friends continue to quote in their writings and speeches the phrase that proved to be inaccurate. As late as November 2012, a Nineteen Day Feast letter, circulated in the United States, quoted 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement on the subject of peace and Supreme Tribunal, which did not reflect the correction. As a result, some Bahá'ís are of the opinion that women are ineligible for membership of the Supreme Tribunal, in contradiction to what the Universal House of Justice has stated in a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand, which had asked the Supreme Body

about the eligibility of women for membership on the Supreme Tribunal:

With regard to the status of women, the important point for Bahá'ís to remember is that in face of the categorical pronouncements in Bahá'í Scripture establishing the equality of men and women, the ineligibility of women for membership of the Universal House of Justice does not constitute evidence of the superiority of men over women. It must also be borne in mind that women are not excluded from any other international institution of the Faith. They are found among the ranks of the Hands of the Cause. They serve as members of the International Teaching Centre and as Continental Counsellors. And, there is nothing in the Text to preclude the participation of women in such future international bodies as the Supreme Tribunal.³³

Another example is the retranslation of a phrase in a Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Corinne True about the ineligibility of women for membership of the Universal House of Justice. The retranslated phrase reads: "*for, as hath been stated in the text of the Book, both the head and the members of the House of Justice must be men.*" When the retranslation was carefully checked against the original text of the Tablet, it became clear that it was inaccurate. The inaccuracy was reported, investigated and corrected to read: "*...for, as hath been stated in the text of the Book, both the head and the members of the House of Justice are men.*"³⁴

One of the many blessings that members of the worldwide Bahá'í community enjoy is the duty and privilege of immersing themselves in the ocean of Bahá'u'lláh's Words and of using the writings of the authorized Interpreters to enhance their understanding of the verities enshrined in His revelation. They also enjoy the right to seek clarification from the Supreme governing Body of the Bahá'í Faith regarding anything that appears obscure, or in the case of translations, anything that

might be inaccurate. No matter how careful the translators of Sacred Writings are and how meticulously the process of review is, the possibility of human error cannot be completely ruled out. The believers familiar with the languages of revelation (Persian and Arabic) would render a valuable service if they paid careful attention to translations and compared them against the original. If anything looks or feels inaccurate in meaning or appearance, report it to the right authority and make sure that it is documented. It would also be most helpful for the translators to be extra mindful of any and all traditional pitfalls.

Having a clear vision about men and women enjoying equal rights has tremendous ramifications not only for this dispensation but also for the distant future. In light of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "*... were He to pronounce one of the leaves to be the manifestation of all His excellent titles, unto no one is given the right to utter why or wherefore, and should one do so he would be regarded as a disbeliever in God and be numbered with such as have repudiated His Truth*", [TB 185] the appearance of female Manifestations of God in future is not beyond the realm of possibility. What we do and say today undoubtedly has repercussions in the future. Our words and actions today have the potency to intensify the afflictions or mitigate their effects when the time for renewal comes again. Let us all work for a prejudice-free society and remember the words of the Universal House of Justice:

World order can be founded only on an unshakeable consciousness of the oneness of mankind, a spiritual truth which all the human sciences confirm. Anthropology, physiology, psychology, recognize only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life. Recognition of this truth requires abandonment of prejudice – prejudice of every kind – race, class, colour, creed, nation, sex, degree of material civilization, everything which enables people to

consider themselves superior to others. Acceptance of the oneness of mankind is the first fundamental prerequisite for reorganization and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind. Universal acceptance of this spiritual principle is essential to any successful attempt to establish world peace...³⁵

NOTES

- ¹ *Women: Bahá'í Writings on the Equality of Men and Women*, the Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, Revised edition 1990, #2.
- ² *Women*, #58
- ³ *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, Introduction,
- ⁴ *Women*, #10.
- ⁵ The King James translation of the Bible, from which this and other quotations cited in this article are taken, is based on the Greek translation of the Hebrew original of the Book.
- ⁶ Malala, the Pakistani young girl who survived a vicious attempt on her life by religious fundamentalists in that country, is a case in point.
- ⁷ Article by this author in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, volume 8, number 1, p. 47.
- ⁸ From a previously unpublished Tablet in Persian, revealed jointly in honor of Jinab-i-Mirza Mu'min and his wife. Mirza Mu'min's wife seems to be the sister of Jinab-i Ibn-i-Abhar.
- ⁹ *Women*, number 10
- ¹⁰ *The Quran*, trans. by George Sale (London, Frederick Warne and Co.), p. 71.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 32
- ¹² *Ibid*, p. 77
- ¹³ "Women's Ordination" in Zoroastrianism, quoted in *Wikipedia*.
- ¹⁴ *Women*, #28
- ¹⁵ *Women*, #58.
- ¹⁶ *Women*, #2
- ¹⁷ *Women*, #3
- ¹⁸ *Women*, #46

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- ¹⁹ *Women*, #47
- ²⁰ *Women*, #52
- ²¹ *Lights of 'Irfan* Book 12, at http://irfancoolloquia.org/100/ma'ani_equality
- ²² *Women*, number 58, also *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. II, p. 379
- ²³ It was as late as 1920 when women in America gained the right to vote.
- ²⁴ *Women*, #19
- ²⁵ The election of Bahá'í women in Iran to Local and National Spiritual Assemblies was a goal of Shoghi Effendi's Ten Year Global Plan. The goal was accomplished at Ridvan 1954.
- ²⁶ *Women*, #13
- ²⁷ For a detailed account, see "Preparing Bahá'í Communities in the East and West to Embrace Gender Equality" by this author, *Lights of 'Irfan*, book twelve, pp 195-218
- ²⁸ *The Declaration of Sentiments* (Seneca Falls Convention, 1848)
- ²⁹ *ibid.*
- ³⁰ "The General Assembly recognizes that the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, human rights should be protected by the rule of law, friendly relations between nations must be fostered, the peoples of the UN have affirmed their faith in human rights, the dignity and the worth of the human person, the equal rights of men and women and are determined to promote social progress, better standards of life and larger freedom and have promised to promote human rights and a common understanding of these rights." (*Simplified Version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*", Summary of Preamble)
- ³¹ The full text is published by the United Nations on its website.
- ³² This subject has been dealt with in considerable detail in "The Effect of Philosophical and Linguistic Gender Biases on the Degradation of Women's Status in Religion", *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 8, number 1.
- ³³ Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand dated 31 May 1988.
- ³⁴ Secretariat letter dated 14 October 1987, attaching a memorandum from the Research Department, of the same date.
- ³⁵ *The Promise of World Peace*. Quoted in *Women*, #35