

TOWARD PROSPERITY

The Role of Women and Men in Building
a Flourishing World Civilization

Bahá'í International Community's Contribution to the
61st United Nations Commission on the Status of Women



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The leaders of the world bear an unenviable burden. They must provide for the well-being of their citizenries, preferring these over themselves, rejecting outdated models that emphasize self and promote imbalances of power. They must ask, and crucially begin answering, the right questions. For instance: What are the elements of our economic system that make it deeply dysfunctional? Why are women largely excluded from meaningful decision-making when their participation benefits everyone? How can we stem the tide of growing inequality threatening the stability of nations? How can we invest in the well-being of rising generations, giving them every opportunity to walk a path far more meaningful and far less treacherous than the one we have tread?

Women and men are equal, and always have been. This is a spiritual truth whose expression in the world has been suppressed throughout most of history, owing in part to imbalanced systems and structures that have long favoured men's progress and participation over women's. While the equality of women and men is being increasingly acknowledged, this does not automatically eliminate the impediments that can obstruct its expression in every dimension of life. On this occasion, as Member States gather to consult about the economic empowerment of women in the changing world of work, we would like to offer some comments on the nature of prosperity itself, taking for granted that it is at once the goal of economic activity and the outcome of genuine progress.

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Significant advances have been made in terms of educational access and the creation of environments for women to thrive alongside men; nevertheless, far more remains to be accomplished. Systemic and structural injustice continues to suppress women's potential, plunging humanity into crisis after crisis. Until these inequalities are thoroughly uprooted from the fabric of society, humanity will remain mired in the conflict, despair, confusion, and imbalance that have come to define much of modern life. While the path towards prosperity has many obstacles, it is also paved with hope.

The world civilization to which humanity aspires is one where the material and spiritual dimensions of life are in harmony, and the material aspects of civilization, such as commerce and governance, are suffused with spiritual principles, such as equity and justice. Naturally, the potency and vigour of a civilization is contingent upon the strength of its component parts. In this regard there is much to say about the qualities governing the relationships among the individuals, institutions, and other constituents that comprise society.

The prevailing economic and geopolitical orders are characterized by conflict and aggression to such an extent that many have succumbed to the view that these qualities represent inescapable features of human nature. While humans are capable of violence, selfishness, cowardice, and competition, they have also repeatedly demonstrated their ability to be kind, to prefer others over themselves, to carry out acts of valour at immense personal cost, and to cooperate when competition is the norm. How much more would these noble tendencies prevail if governments allocated substantial resources to cultivating

the higher nature of their citizens, focusing vigorous learning processes around how the latent spiritual and moral powers of their inhabitants can be developed and released? What is more, the dynamics that have come to define relationships of power must be reimagined in the light of a genuine understanding of the oneness of humanity in order for all people to have an opportunity to lead meaningful lives. Understandably, changes of this magnitude will be hard won, requiring vision and sacrifice, and the long-term commitment of the leaders and citizens of the world.

A flourishing world civilization will draw on the participation of all people, whose skills and talents should be harmonized with the needs of the greater good. This will increasingly become possible as all children are given access to a quality education that helps them develop their intellectual and moral capabilities. Moreover, as women are the first educators of rising generations, their educational opportunity should be given emphasis in all communities. The caring, conciliatory qualities that women can bring to the workforce, indeed, to every sphere of life, have long been undervalued, and humanity has subsequently suffered. Can we foresee the fruits that will grow when true partnerships between men and women emerge in all dimensions of life? Humanity can be likened to a bird with two wings, the male and the female, that has struggled to take flight because the female wing has been suppressed for so long. Who can fully envision the great heights to which humanity will soar when both wings are coordinated and strong?

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The period of youth is one of immense significance in the life of any human being. This time of life represents a period with special possibilities. It is a time of preparation and action, when the young can develop an orientation to service and a sense of social

responsibility that they will carry with them their entire lives. Neither is likely without a special kind of education. Education can be the difference between a young man who respects his female counterparts and one who brutalizes them. Education around such attitudes unfolds at home, in schools, in communities, and the myriad social environments where life plays out.

The family is a crucial social environment within which formative education takes place. In this regard, there is much to be learned about organizing societies in a way that does not exclude women from meaningful participation in work should they decide to dedicate a focused period of their lives to the rearing of children. Conversely, it is important to recognize the significant role of fathers in their families' lives; their ability for substantial engagement in this arena deserves special consideration.

The discipline that governs our relationships with the world is largely formed within the family. The tendencies to be unjust or just, to act violently or with kindness, to be dishonest or trustworthy, are usually developed at home. These habits are then taken into every instance of social interaction, becoming either obstacles or stepping stones to progress, tearing apart or weaving together the very fabric of society. If brothers are allowed to dominate their sisters, for instance, a habit is formed that will be carried from the living room to the classroom, the workplace and finally, the international arena. Conversely, when daughters are included in decision-making processes, when sons are encouraged to care for the household, characters are being developed. Children learn that the intellectual powers of both boys and girls are vital, that the nurturing qualities for which women are known are equally praiseworthy when demonstrated by men.

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With respect to more formal educational programs, the significance of this stage of life must be borne in mind. Young people are beginning to understand their role in society, in all dimensions of life, including the economic life of their communities. If the rising generations are not merely to labour within an ailing system, but are to gradually contribute to the creation of a flourishing one, key capabilities must be cultivated early.

First, their education must be comprehensive, addressing their burgeoning spiritual, physical, and intellectual powers. A key principle that must be taught from an early age is the oneness of humanity. Within this, the equality of women and men should be emphasized. Young people see the contradictions in the world. Words and concepts alone cannot erase the often harmful messaging assailing them from all quarters. The inclusion of practical components in which boys and girls work shoulder to shoulder to identify challenges in their social environments, and consult on plans to address these, can benefit the entire community. Likewise, if they are accompanied by more experienced, trusted members of their communities to carry out acts of service while given the leeway to identify needs and design progressively more complex plans over time, the rising generations are assisted to develop new, healthy patterns of thought and action. From a young age, youth will learn that true leadership is characterized by selfless service, is borne by boys and girls equally, and is achieved through consultation, cooperation, and commitment to long-term action.

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It is the hope of the Bahá'í International Community that world leaders will give serious thought not only to how the current economic system can receive more meaningful contributions from women, but also to how the rising generations can be assisted in building a new one.



