



In full partnership:

**Women's advancement as a
prerequisite for peaceful societies**

A statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 69th Session
of the Commission on the Status of Women

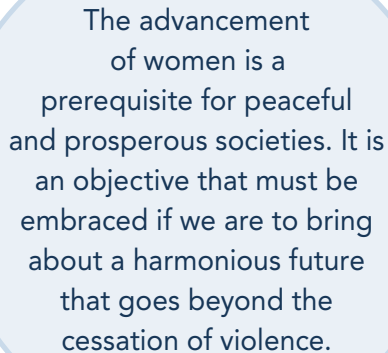
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The end of the twentieth century was momentous in humanity's collective history. After centuries of effort, women's rights were recognized as human rights. Significant strides were also made to translate political agreement into laws and practices. Together, these advances culminated in the landmark Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing—an occasion we honor thirty years on.

Notably, the Conference signaled widespread commitment to the foundational principle of gender equality, drawing some 50,000 delegates from governments, United Nations agencies, and civil society. Representatives of the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) collaborated alongside these actors at that seminal moment—as they had at the preceding conferences in Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi. BIC representatives



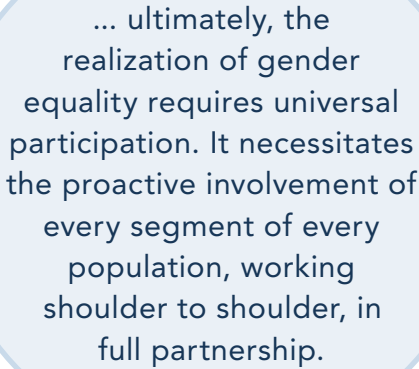
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have since witnessed the international landscape of women's advancement evolve, and continue to work closely with those actively pursuing the Conference's desired outcomes.

The advancement of women is a prerequisite for peaceful and prosperous societies. It is an objective that must be embraced if we are to bring about a harmonious future that goes beyond the cessation of violence. Yet, the 12 critical areas of concern articulated in Beijing, devised to support women's full development and equality with men, are still to be adequately addressed. Hard-won gains are eroding as patriarchal norms embedded in the systems and structures of societies resurge with harmful effects for women and men alike. Indeed, history has demonstrated that institutional reforms remain tenuous and vulnerable to shifts in power and priorities if they are not accompanied by a more enduring transformation within individual mindsets and social norms.

This anniversary, then, provides an opportunity to derive insights from communities learning to cultivate healthier and more inclusive dynamics, beginning within the home—where many societal beliefs and attitudes often originate—extending into neighborhoods and villages, and eventually leading to the emergence of just systems and practices. The knowledge generated by these experiences offer valuable lessons, which will also need to be applied at the international level. For, ultimately, the realization of gender equality requires universal participation. It necessitates the proactive involvement of every segment of every population, working shoulder to shoulder, in full partnership.





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Gender equality is not only a goal which humanity aspires to achieve, but a necessary condition for peace and prosperity. Societies with higher levels of equality between the sexes tend to have lower levels of violent conflict. Likewise, it is widely accepted that peace processes that engage more women tend to last longer.

Failure to recognize that women are equal to men ultimately impedes the material, social, and spiritual flourishing of every individual. Yet, women, who are more likely to experience abuse, bias, and discrimination, are also more likely to be excluded from spaces designed to address these violations. If humanity is to fully understand and overcome the systemic nature of these challenges, the rich diversity of human experience must be drawn upon in its entirety. Barriers that prevent women from contributing knowledge to the search for effective solutions must therefore be removed.

Diverse perspectives must be reflected in decision-making spaces, but care must be given to guard against tokenistic representation. Prejudicial attitudes can be held by women and men alike; normative change is therefore necessary. Patriarchal tendencies and self-serving ambition will need to be replaced with qualities like collaboration, reciprocity, compassion, and a

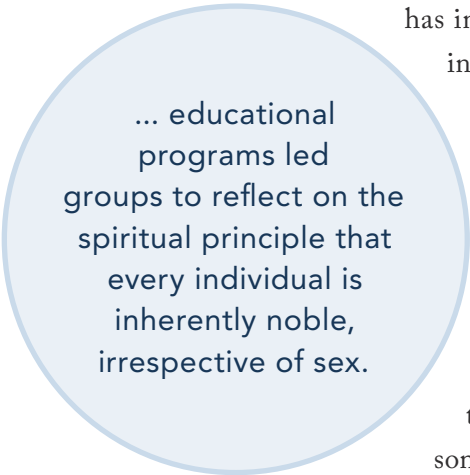
humble posture of learning in all settings. Until transformation takes root within mindsets and finds expression in culture, the underlying causes of prejudice and discrimination, embedded in the systems and structures of societies, will remain unquestioned and will continue to perpetuate injustice.



What might it look like in practice for populations to commit to the principle of gender equality as a foundation for peaceful societies? Bahá'í communities, for their part, are working to address long-standing beliefs and practices that run counter to the principle of equality. In areas where their efforts have become more systematic, these communities are observing dramatic and profound shifts in the way women are viewed in their societies. These changing perceptions are leading to greater degrees of inclusivity and equity, allowing more opportunities for women to serve in leadership roles and contribute to social change.

What might it look like in practice for populations to commit to the principle of gender equality as a foundation for peaceful societies?

Of course these communities still grapple with age-old systems and customs that have historically maintained an unjust status quo. But what is distinctive about their experience is the approach to social transformation: the means for constructive social change must be coherent with its ends. This approach



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has involved a range of educational initiatives designed to develop capacity within individuals to learn—with their family members, neighbors, friends, and co-workers—to apply moral and spiritual qualities such as unity, justice, equality, and trustworthiness in their personal lives and social settings.

This educational process, offered throughout the individual's life cycle, is guided and reinforced by a global system of coordination, and is implemented by local populations according to their specific circumstances and resources.

In the state of Bihar, India, for instance, these educational programs led groups to reflect on the spiritual principle that every individual is inherently noble, irrespective of sex. As they continued to engage in these programs, it became increasingly difficult to overlook social practices that contradicted this principle. Participants—both women and men—began to identify harmful trends within their villages, and considered how to respond to the fact that women were held back in many areas such as advancing in their education and contributing to decision-making.

The Bahá'í community decided to convene consultative spaces for families to explore the underlying causes of such challenges and to devise potential pathways forward. Participants shared

experiences, and through courageous deliberation, explored the uncomfortable truth that girls and women were not viewed as inherently equal within their societies, and thus did not share the same opportunities as boys and men.



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It became clear that this unjust reality was reinforced by numerous expectations, assumptions, and fears—for example, that the destiny of a daughter was to be married off, that women were considered “unclean” during menstruation, or that it was unsafe for girls to travel far distances to school. These attitudes found expression in many harmful ways. Boys were often prioritized when deciding which child to send to school, financial resources were directed toward a dowry rather than a daughter’s professional development, and women who were viewed as “unclean” were not permitted to enter certain settings, thus preventing their participation in decision-making spaces or leadership roles.

The enhanced capacity to analyze the manifestations of inequality was an important driver for cultural transformation within the community. Many boys and men began to openly interrogate long-held beliefs and examine the ways their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters were impacted. It became clear that this was not just a challenge for women alone; the whole community was impacted and this demanded universal action.

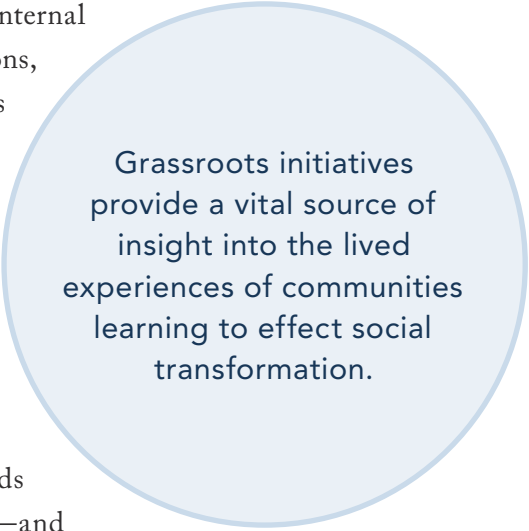
Participants have since been working collectively to remove the obstacles they identified. Together, they have been creating new educational opportunities that emphasize the moral and intellectual development of every child, and have been laboring to improve the safety of their villages. They have been reflecting on how individuals' mindsets can continue to align with the principle of gender equality and, in doing so, have been contributing to the evolution of a new culture. Many participants have commented on how these consultative spaces, combined with the community's educational efforts described above, have contributed to a rise in mutual respect between women and men in their villages. Many have perceived a greater sense of trust, common cause, understanding, and ultimately unity—within the home and extending into the community. All these are indicators of movement toward greater levels of peace.



Grassroots initiatives provide a vital source of insight into the lived experiences of communities learning to effect social transformation. The UN is well-suited—through the mandate of and networks available to UN Women, among others—to distill, analyze, and share experiences that promote women's advancement at the local, regional, and national levels, and to identify methodologies that can be implemented by national governments. The UN's role will continue to be critical in raising awareness of, and advocating for, the principle of gender equality as a fundamental prerequisite for peace on the international stage, as well as in shaping relevant international policy frameworks. The UN is also uniquely positioned to

model, within its own internal structures and operations, a culture that dismantles patriarchal norms and centers approaches that are inclusive and collaborative.

A future where women can meaningfully engage as equal protagonists in all fields of human endeavor—and where every individual, irrespective of sex, is able to flourish as a co-creator of society—is the destination toward which humanity must now advance. Far more than simply an aspiration, the principle of gender equality needs to now be embraced by growing populations, young and old alike in every country around the globe, if we are to usher in a future of lasting peace and prosperity.



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Bahá'í
International
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