

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

25 July 1984

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice received your letter which raised questions concerning the status of men and women especially within the family setting. We are requested by the House of Justice to convey to you the following points.

The Universal House of Justice invites you once again to carefully read the letter written on its behalf and addressed to the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand, dated 28 December 1980. This letter is published in the compilation *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life*, pp. 57–61.

Authoritative interpretation of the Writings was the exclusive domain of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. When the House of Justice stated that the “father can be regarded as the ‘head’ of the family,” it was giving expression to its own inference as you indicate. This inference, as the letter to New Zealand points out, is based on the clear and primary responsibility of the husband to provide for the financial support of the wife and family, and on the provisions of the law of intestacy, which assigns special functions and rights to the eldest son.

The description of the husband as “head” of the family does not confer superiority upon the husband nor does it give him special rights to undermine the rights of the other members of his family. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother—none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary....

The relationship between family members represents a complex of mutual and complementary duties and responsibilities that are implemented within the framework of the Bahá'í ideal of family life and are conducive to its unity. The concept of a Bahá'í family is based on the principle that the man is charged with the responsibility of supporting the entire family financially, and the woman is the chief and primary educator of the children. This does not mean that these functions are inflexibly fixed and cannot be changed and adjusted to suit particular family situations. Furthermore, while primary responsibility is assigned, it is anticipated that fathers would play a significant role in the education of the children and women would be breadwinners. (See pages 59–60 of *Bahá'í Marriage and Family Life*)

The principle of the equality between women and men, like the other teachings of the Faith, can be effectively and universally established among the friends when it is pursued in conjunction with all the other aspects of Bahá'í life. Change is an evolutionary process requiring patience with one's self and others, loving education and the passage of time as the believers deepen their knowledge of the principles of the Faith, gradually discard long-held traditional attitudes and progressively conform their lives to the unifying teachings of the Cause.

There are a number of Tablets on marriage. You are referred, for example, to *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 117–22, and *Bahá'í Prayers* (United States, 1982 Edition), pp. 104–08.

In relation to the particular “Marriage Tablet” to which you refer, we provide, for your information, an extract from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a

National Spiritual Assembly on 4 April 1976, which deals with the use of this “Tablet”:

The so-called “Marriage Tablet” ... is not a Tablet at all but is an unauthenticated record by Ahmad Sohrab of a talk by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The friends may use it, but it should be made clear that this is not Scripture ...

The Promulgation of Universal Peace (1982 Edition) provides much useful source material on the subject of the equality of men and women. For talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá citing historical examples, see particularly:

- Talk to the Federation of Women’s Clubs, pp. 74–77
- Talk to a woman’s suffrage meeting, pp. 133–37
- Talk at Franklin Square House, pp. 280–84

We trust that the foregoing information will resolve your concerns and help to reinforce your sense of certitude.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat