

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

5 August 1999

[To a National Spiritual Assembly]

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 30 May 1999 . . . and has asked us to respond as follows.

The House of Justice is pleased to note that you are planning to give greater attention to the advancement of women in both the internal functioning of your Bahá'í community and in your external affairs activities. The establishment of an Office for the Advancement of Women has the potential to provide a powerful reinforcement to the efforts of the believers in this important aspect of Bahá'í endeavor. In response to your question about the appointment of a member of your National Spiritual Assembly as the director of the Office, the House of Justice feels that this matter should be left to your discretion; however, it advises you to consider carefully the possibility that the appointment of a member, or of a close family relative of a member, could well be misunderstood by your Bahá'í community and thus create a negative impression. You are encouraged to seek the views of the Counselors on this point, and indeed on the other aspects of the new initiative you are now planning.

You have in several places referred to your distress at the attitudes and conduct of some male members of the Bahá'í community concerning the advancement of women, in their regarding it as an issue which concerns only women, or reacting to it through immoderate language or inappropriate humor. In assisting them to acquire an understanding that they have a vital role to play in the implementation of this principle of the Faith, you have many possible approaches from which to select. For example, their participation in a careful study of the compilation on women would serve to bring to their attention those passages in the document which refer clearly to the efforts which are required of men. A contemplation of the peerless example of the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá should include a study of His actions and statements to advance the status and development of women. The messages of the House of Justice, calling upon all elements of the Bahá'í community for a greater commitment to the advancement of women, must also be given due weight in considering the responsibility of men in this regard.

Your recommendation that the compilation on women be revised is noted, and will be considered in due course, most especially as the amount of material to be included in it expands with elucidations of the House of Justice in response to the needs of the developing Bahá'í community. The experience you mention, that of individuals focusing on only one passage from the present document and using it as a vehicle in attempting to press their views on an individual who has a different understanding, is not solved simply by a reordering of the passages; rather it points to a need for deeper study and more careful reading, by which is obtained a comprehensive understanding of this complex subject such that all passages are seen to be elements of a harmonious whole. In striving to attain this state, account must also be taken of the statements of the House of Justice in the Introduction to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* concerning the progressive clarification and progressive application of the laws of the Faith through the instrumentality of the Covenant.

You refer to the view which exists in some quarters of your community, based apparently on a passage written on behalf of the Guardian to two believers in response to a particular situation, that it is not appropriate to create Bahá'í agencies such as an Office for the Advancement of Women or to hold meetings to which only women are invited. Such a view ignores the clear advice and encouragement set out in several messages of the House of Justice concerning the

implementation of the principle of equality of the sexes, or the actions it has taken in setting up an Office for the Advancement of Women in the United Nations Office in New York. Attention should also be drawn to the letter of 25 May 1975 from the House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, in which reference is made to eighty National Spiritual Assemblies being called upon specifically to organize Bahá'í activities for women. Passages in the compilation on women include the call by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for "women's assemblages," His mention of some of the subjects which should be discussed at such gatherings, and His warning against an approach which would lead to greater disharmony and argumentation between men and women. Thus those men who are apprehensive about meetings of women can be reassured that these Bahá'í gatherings would not degenerate into the contentiousness and antagonism toward males which appears in some such meetings organized by radical or extremist elements in the wider society.

In the conduct of your activities for the advancement of women, you should take great care to avoid unquestioning acceptance of approaches and themes which influence the efforts toward that end in the world around you. Statistics on the participation of women on Bahá'í institutions are compiled from time to time by Bahá'í agencies, including the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office for the Advancement of Women, and have been published on occasion in the annual *Bahá'í World* year book. However, caution should be observed in their interpretation, because of the small size of the Bahá'í communities in most countries, and the differences in the traditional attitudes toward the participation of women in the various cultures represented in the worldwide community. It would also be improper to use these results in an attempt to ensure that the composition of institutions is evenly balanced between the sexes, since believers are enjoined to select those best qualified to serve, irrespective of their sex. The Faith does not seek to promote the advancement of women through an artificial endeavor to achieve parity, but rather through a fundamental transformation of values and understanding coupled with the creation of opportunities and encouragement for the development of talents and capabilities.

Likewise, Bahá'í institutions are admonished in the teachings to consider the welfare and sentiments of all elements of their community in their decision-making, and to create opportunities for all to participate in consultation at gatherings such as the Nineteen Day Feast.

The sharing of Bahá'í material developed in one country with others can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including use of the Bahá'í International Community's Office for the Advancement of Women, as well as advertising in your [national newsletter].

Your comments on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women illustrate the point made earlier about the need for care in determining the extent to which the Bahá'í community should identify with the initiatives of non-Bahá'í bodies. A document such as the Convention should be studied to ascertain whether the provisions are, in fact, wholly compatible with the Bahá'í teachings. As you are aware, the Faith upholds the equality of the sexes but specifies a differentiation of functions in some areas, such as educational priorities when resources are limited, service in armed defense forces, membership of the Universal House of Justice, exemption from certain laws in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, intestacy provisions, and so on, which could be perceived as effecting a discrimination between men and women.

You are assured of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines on your behalf, as you embark on a process which could well prove to be a powerful means of promoting the interests of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh in . . . and beyond.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

