

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

22 December 2013

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter dated 1 August 2013, asking how to respond to a question that arose in an online forum conducted under the auspices of the ... and that concerns the ineligibility of women for membership on the House of Justice in relation to the Bahá'í principle of the equality of men and women. We have been directed to say that, while no one answer will satisfy every individual, the following principles should be considered.

Only God, the Creator of mankind and of each human soul, knows the purpose of His creation and exactly what, at each stage of its development, is required for its fulfillment. This purpose, through His great love, is conveyed to mankind by the Divine Manifestation. As Bahá'u'lláh affirms, "No man, however acute his perception, can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained." The Manifestation "doeth as He willeth" in establishing His laws and ordinances in accordance with human reality and His intended aims for individual and collective transformation. To recognize Bahá'u'lláh is to have faith in His authority to make the judgments necessary to guide the progress of humanity through the course of the Dispensation.

As you are aware, among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh for this age is the equality of men and women—a revolutionary step forward in religious history that has set the stage for the advancement of women in every field of human endeavor. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained:

Know thou, O handmaid, that 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 favored, 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.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, section 38.3)

Just as this principle of equality has issued from the Pen of Bahá'u'lláh, so too, the instruction that the membership of the House of Justice is confined to men is set forth in His Writings, as confirmed in the authoritative statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. While there is no explanation of the reason for this provision of the Sacred Text, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated:

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.

(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, section 38.4)

Thus, Bahá'ís are presented with an apparent paradox. We do not possess an explanation that would fully satisfy a critical observer. Yet, having acknowledged Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God, and having accepted the principle that "He doeth whatsoever He willeth" according to His understanding of the condition of the world and the problems facing humanity, we accept His instruction and remain assured by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's promise that clarity of understanding will be

achieved in due course. At the same time, we cannot rest upon the explicit statements in the Bahá'í writings about the equality of men and women as being sufficient assurance to others about our allegiance to this principle. Rather, we are obligated to demonstrate our commitment through our actions and accomplishments, working to establish equality between men and women within the Bahá'í community and in the wider society. In this regard, fair-minded individuals will find an abundance of evidence in the number of women serving in Bahá'í administrative institutions, in projects of social and economic development, and in all aspects of community life.

An important point to remember is that in the face of the categorical pronouncements in Bahá'í Scripture establishing the equality of men and women, the ineligibility of women for membership on the Universal House of Justice cannot be interpreted as evidence of the superiority of men over women. It must also be borne in mind that women are not excluded from any other institution of the Faith. They have been among the ranks of the Hands of the Cause, they serve as members of the International Teaching Centre, as Continental Counsellors, and as elected members of both National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, discharging vital responsibilities worldwide in stimulating the expansion of the Bahá'í community and fostering its spiritual life. Indeed the percentage of women serving on Bahá'í institutions often significantly exceeds their representation on institutions in the society around them.

You are free to share a copy of this letter with the members of the forum. Should further questions arise, you are encouraged to turn to your National Spiritual Assembly.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat