

Gender Equality

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“You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.”

Those were the final words of Ṭáhirih (the Pure One), an early Baha’i, a poetess, and a heroine of Iranian history, who courageously advocated the emancipation of women in 1848 - at a time when such efforts were only beginning to gather momentum in a few places around the world.

It is related that “when she entered a meeting, even the learned were silent. She was so well versed in philosophy and science that those in her presence always considered and consulted her first. Her courage was unparalleled; she faced her enemies fearlessly ... until her last breath, then gave her life for her faith.”

In the decades since then, great strides have been made in improving the status of women, but there still remains a critical need for the removal of barriers that hinder their progress in our society.

March 8th marks the International Women’s Day. As more and more stories of unequal treatment of women, and abuse and violence towards them come to light, it is important to remind ourselves of the underlying spiritual truth:

“All mankind are the creatures and servants of one God, and in His estimate all are human,” the Baha’i writings explain. “Man is a generic term applying to all humanity. The biblical statement ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ does not mean that woman was not created. The image and likeness of God apply to her as well. ...To accept and observe a distinction which God has not intended in creation is ignorance and superstition.”

Therefore, according to these writings, “the equality of men and women is ... a universal spiritual truth—a statement about human nature.... That women should enjoy equal rights with men is a requirement of justice. It is a principle consonant with the highest standard of purity and sanctity, whose application strengthens family life and is essential to the regeneration and progress of any nation. Indeed, peace in the world and the advancement of civilization depend on its realization. ...

“The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be.”

These writings especially emphasize the importance of the education of women and girls because “it is through educated mothers that the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society.”

The Baha’i writings also highlight the important role of women – as “lovers of peace” – in the establishment of national and international peace: “Equality between men and women is conducive to the abolition of warfare for the reason that women will never be willing to sanction it. Mothers will not give their sons as sacrifices upon the battlefield after twenty years of anxiety and loving devotion in rearing them from infancy.... So it will come to pass that when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, when they enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics, war will cease; for woman will be the obstacle and hindrance to it.”

May we transcend the cultural norms that impede the progress of women in society, and actively promote the conditions that enable them to participate fully - as equals of men - in all areas of human endeavor.