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Gender Studies Forum

Report of the First Meeting of the Gender Studies Forum

THIS, THE FIRST Gender Studies Forum made an excellent start in its aim of stimulating debate on all issues relating to gender. It was particularly encouraging that several men attended, and that those who presented papers argued the case for initiating discussion of male gender identity in recognition that the currently accepted view of masculinity may need to be modified. The interdependence of the sexes needs to be recognised as this is what encourages sustainable relationships. The exploration of gender issues therefore necessitates involvement of both sexes. It must be acknowledged that both sexes have complementary qualities, and that in the ideal situation these are balanced and therefore can work together like the wings of a bird in flight. Several of the speakers spoke of the effects of the perceived current imbalance in our modern world, in which male qualities are seen as "the norm". Often, women can only advance insofar as they are seen to aspire to these same qualities. This can lead to stress in both, as women's lives are forced to change in ways conspiring against the expression of their natural femininity in a family setting, and men feel threatened as their traditional roles are taken away from them. Some of these negative changes may even be being encouraged by current policies to increase the number of women in the workplace without however, making available affordable child care, or compelling companies to give equal pay to both sexes.

Most speakers raised the importance of considering the spiritual consequences and motivations for actions, as this is being found to increase the chances of sustainability of actions. However, the prevailing view at policy level is that science and technology make the largest contribution to society's wealth and therefore "quality of life". There is currently little dialogue to consider the spiritual or religious perspective. Perhaps it is in this area that women are destined to make their greatest contribution, once they are permitted to play a larger part in the decision-making process. While the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith tell us that:

"In the estimation of God there is no distinction of sex ..."⁽¹⁾ the matter has more pressing importance, since:

"The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is one of the most important, though less acknowledged prerequisites of peace. The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations. There are no grounds, moral, practical, or biological, upon which such denial can be justified. Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge."⁽²⁾

Although women's rights have been equated with human rights since the 1940s, and this has added "legitimacy" to the cause, it is still largely a man's world, in which women

struggle to overcome the limitations imposed on them. Too often, "equality" of the sexes has equated to women aspiring to masculine characteristics, rather than being able to celebrate their own. The Bahá'í Writings speak of the qualities of love and service in which women are particularly strong, and that there must be a balance between masculine and feminine qualities.

One paper considered the empowerment of women through use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and noted that the perceived potential of the Internet varied widely around the world but did not seem to map to economic prosperity. Another looked at the much higher incidence of teenage pregnancy in the UK compared to that in the Netherlands, in an attempt to discover possible contributing factors. We learned that although there are more teenage pregnancies among the lower social classes, it is not confined to one social class, but may be linked to low expectations of life. Treatment of pregnant teenagers is different in the two countries: there is no state support for teenage mothers in the Netherlands, and they tend to be regarded as social "outcasts". In the UK the state support is such that it is even suspected of encouraging early pregnancy, and there appears to be no social stigma. One conclusion of the paper was that attitudes to sex education need to change, and the role of the media may be crucial in its influence which can be seen as enticing young people into sexual activity rather than aiding in education about its consequences.

Although we are no longer in the first flush of the Feminist era, it is obvious that there are still many issues to address and barriers to full gender equality to overcome. The Gender Studies Forum has an important role to play in airing issues and stimulating debate, and it is to be hoped that this seminar was the first of many to come.

This first Gender Studies Forum came into being through collaboration between the Office for the Advancement of Women (OAW), and the Association for Bahá'í Studies, English-Speaking Europe (ABS(ESE)), and with support from Leicester City Council and the Women's National Commission. A Report of the meeting was presented to the Commission on the Status of Women at the UN in New York, in February 2002, by the Office for the Advancement of Women. It is hoped that future Gender Studies Fora will form the basis of a Special Interest Group within the ABS(ESE) and continue the collaboration between the OAW, the Association of Bahá'í Women and other non-Bahá'í agencies. The text of most of the papers presented may be found on the ABW website, and in a Report obtainable from the OAW; selected papers will also be published in *The Associate* (free to members of the ABS(ESE)).

1 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Promulgation of Universal Peace p. 107

2 Lights of Guidance, 3rd Edition, 1994. No 2090, p. 619

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