
The Power of Religious Freedom, The Power of Women

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Religious freedom and gender equality are principles that are not only equally vital, but intimately linked. The world needs both, if it is to respond effectively to the numerous challenges facing humanity. It needs the hope and strength of spirit that faith can impart. And it needs in much fuller measure the phenomenal reservoirs of insight, innovation, and capacity found in the women of the world. Critical, then, is learning, with ever greater precision, how these foundational ideals are translated into practical, lived realities in countless local contexts.

When we consider the relationship between women, religious freedom, and society, certain conceptual tensions can arise. How do we reconcile a vision of gender equality with religious teachings that seem to contradict that vision, for example? How do we honestly acknowledge the ways in which religious communities have, throughout history, wielded their sacred scriptures and spiritual teachings toward divergent ends—at times to subjugate women and at times to empower them? How do we account for the role faith and religion are playing today in guaranteeing and preserving fundamental human rights, on the one hand, and a resurgence in violence carried out in the name of religion, on the other?

Contributing to such challenges is the wide range of views about what actually constitutes religion. Is it a fixed set of texts, doctrines, and ordinances to whose literal interpretation humanity must mold itself? Is it a collection of norms and practices to draw on where, when, and to whatever extent we find useful? For members of the Baha'i Faith, my own tradition, religion has been approached as a means to awaken and cultivate, at the practical and grassroots level, the high-minded and noble attributes latent in every soul. This is not to deny that those acting in the name of religion have sometimes stood as obstacles to both the advancement of women and the free expression of religious faith itself.

Yet equally clear is the fact that religion reaches to the very roots of human motivation. At its highest, religion can serve as an indispensable means of translating enthusiasm for causes and programs into sustained, long-term commitment to action and transformation. Religious communities therefore can and must come to function as communities of practice where spiritual principles, such as the equality of women and men and the freedom of conscience, are applied thoughtfully to the life of society, for the benefit of all.

Given the powerful role religion can play in sustaining constructive social change, the right to hold a belief must be protected. Freedom of religion, understood here as the opportunity to investigate the full range of human existence, stands as a means to explore, understand more fully, and actively address the many challenges and opportunities facing humanity today. The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to change them is central to human development.

Religious freedom can be facilitated from the international level, through norm-setting and the codification of universal principles and standards, as well as from the national level, through the application of laws, policies, and governmental action. Yet it is people's on-the-ground, daily experience that determines the degree to which religious freedom has been translated from a lofty ideal into concrete, lived realities. And it is at this local level that large numbers of women around the world can have a transformative impact in building new patterns of individual and collective life in their communities and in society more broadly.

It should be noted that women are often denied freedom of religion, for example by being forced to adopt their husband's religion or being forbidden to convert to a different religion. On the other hand, it is also important to recognize that women are often among the conservative actors that enforce patriarchal norms and standards within religious communities. Of central importance, therefore, are arrangements and norms that promote the right of women to worship and serve within religious contexts, in ways that further freedom of religion and gender equality.

In looking at the localization of social progress, including the promotion of religious freedom, I will draw on the experience of the worldwide Baha'i community, with which I am most familiar. The equality of women and men is a foundational principle of the Baha'i Faith. Its holy writings state: "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." And again: "Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible." Bahá'ís around the world, then, are working with like-minded collaborators to build new patterns of community life, as well as institutional structures, that reflect this inherent equality. Just as importantly, they are striving to learn how to draw on the inherent power of women and men working shoulder to shoulder as equals to advance other constructive social ends, such as the strengthening of religious freedom.

Central to these efforts are moral and spiritual educational programs that seek to assist individuals of all backgrounds and faith traditions to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to contribute to the transformation of their societies. The equality of women and men is explicit in the approach and curricula of this process, the central objective of which is building capacity for lasting social change. Those who enter these education programs, women and men alike, are assisted, from the earliest stages, to undertake increasingly complex acts of service in their local community. They gradually gain the vision, confidence, and skills necessary to begin leading activities and programs themselves. And in this way, a good portion of those who enter the process simply as participants

go on to shoulder increasing responsibility for its perpetuation and expansion.

Important to note here is the role that religious engagement can play in preparing women and girls for positions of leadership. In the process described above, numerous women serving in voluntary roles such as facilitators of study groups or teachers of classes have become key contributors and increasingly recognized resources in their local community. As their experience expands, a percentage begin to coordinate the efforts of others, at levels ranging from the neighborhood to the national. In many cases, time-worn assumptions about what women can accomplish in society—as well as restrictions placed on the sphere of activity afforded to them within it—have had to be set aside.

For women coming from a range of backgrounds, this experience has fueled a growing sense of being a capable, empowered, and valued contributor to the common good. Equally important, seeing women taking on roles of increasing responsibility, visibility, and decision-making has assisted men—and not infrequently stretched and challenged them—to rethink inherited expectations about gender roles. This is crucial, for in Baha’i thought, the process of advancing the station of women is a duty and an obligation—as well as a blessing and a benefit—that pertains as much to men and boys as women and girls. “Let it be known once more,” the Baha’i writings state, “that until woman and man recognize and realize equality, social and political progress here or anywhere will not be possible.”

In considering women’s role in society and its many intersections with religion, particular note should be made of the influence and obligations of religious leaders. In a world harassed by conflict in the name of religion, religious leaders bear tremendous responsibility for guiding their followers toward mutual understanding with those who think and believe differently. Legal mechanisms alone will not be sufficient to build a world in which no woman is prevented by prejudice and superstition from making her full contribution. Nor will formal structures alone provide every believer the freedom to safely live out their deepest beliefs and convictions. The role of religious leaders as partners, in word and deed, in the creation of a culture of respect for human dignity and human rights cannot be overstated.

It has often been noted that religious freedom and the advancement of women go hand in hand. Norms and social structures that inhibit one tend to also undermine the other. But influence runs in the opposite direction, as well. As growing numbers of women come to take meaningful roles of responsibility and leadership in their communities; as their perspectives and aspirations are accorded more weight in deliberations on the future; as their contributions are increasingly recognized and actively sought out—as dynamics such as these are strengthened, norms of respect for basic human rights, including religious freedom, deepen and strengthen across the generality of a population. These are developments that Baha’i communities have seen repeatedly, across a wide variety of social and cultural circumstances, and they are developments which are needed in societies of every kind. Let us redouble our efforts, therefore, to unlock the power of women, and the principle of

gender equality more broadly, to advance the frontiers of religious freedom and the many other ideals that characterize a more just, equal, and prospering world.

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