

Devotional Gathering: Equality Between Women and Men

Introduction

Equality is maintaining a balanced and respectful partnership between two people in a relationship. This partnership honors one another's minds, hearts, and souls and motivates you to work together as a team. Equality, paired with respect for one another's qualities, talents, and skills, affects every aspect of your courtship and your marriage. Equality helps you to value one another as human beings and each other's ability to think, love, and be of service to others.

The Bahá'í Writings sometimes describe equality by using the analogy of a bird that needs both wings to be strong enough to fly. In a bird, if one wing is weak, it has difficulty flying smoothly and successfully. Marriage, like a bird, needs both of you to be strong and to work together to achieve the full benefits and capacity of your union. Interdependence, along with independence, is necessary for the most effective functioning. This means that as individuals, you must be mature enough before entering marriage that you can function effectively on your own when you have to. In marriage, you then choose to blend your lives together and function as an intimate team. Honest, ongoing communication, learning about each other as a unique man and woman, and doing your best to demonstrate equality in your actions and attitudes, will all benefit your relationship.

Musical selections are wonderful for touching people's hearts, and you are encouraged to use them whenever appropriate.

Quotations

1. **Prayer for Women/Wives:** Magnified be Thy name, O Lord my God! Behold Thou mine eye expectant to gaze on the wonders of Thy mercy, and mine ear longing to hearken unto Thy sweet melodies, and my heart yearning for the living waters of Thy knowledge. Thou seest Thy handmaiden, O my God, standing before the habitation of Thy mercy, and calling upon Thee by Thy name which Thou hast chosen above all other names and set up over all that are in heaven and on earth. Send down upon her the breaths of Thy mercy, that she may be carried away wholly from herself, and be drawn entirely towards the seat which, resplendent with the glory of Thy face, sheddeth afar the radiance of Thy sovereignty, and is established as Thy throne. Potent art Thou to do what Thou wilt. No God is there beside Thee, the All-Glorious, the Most Bountiful. (Baha'u'llah: *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 147-148)

2. Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God. ... Verily God created women for men, and men for women. (Bahá'u'lláh: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, "Women"*, p. 379)

3. And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the equality of women and men. 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. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 302)

4. The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, “Women”*, p. 369)

5. Divine Justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other. . . . Human virtues belong equally to all!
 ~ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 162

6. As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Paris Talks*, p. 133)

7. Woman’s lack of progress and proficiency has been due to her need of equal education and opportunity. Had she been allowed this equality, there is no doubt she would be the counterpart of man in ability and capacity. The happiness of mankind will be realized when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the complement and helpmeet of the other. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 182)

8. Equality between men and women does not, indeed physiologically it cannot, mean identity of functions. In some things women excel men, for others men are better fitted than women, while in very many things the difference of sex is of no effect at all. The differences of function are most apparent in family life. The capacity for motherhood has many far-reaching implications which are recognized in Bahá’í Law. For example, when it is not possible to educate all one’s children, daughters receive preference over sons, as mothers are the first educators of the next generation. (Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, “Women”*, p. 370)

9. The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is one of the most important, though less acknowledged pre-requisites 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 endeavor will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge. (Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 618)

10. It is also evident from Bahá'í teachings that no husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, and that such a reprehensible action is the antithesis of the relationship of mutual respect and equality enjoined by the Bahá'í writings—a relationship governed by the principles of consultation and devoid of the use of force to compel obedience to one's will. (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, "Preserving Bahá'í Marriages", p. 458)
11. ...[T]here is a much wider sphere of relationships between men and women than in the home, and this too we should consider in the context of Bahá'í society, not in that of past or present social norms. For example, although the mother is the first educator of the child, and the most important formative influence in his development, the father also has the responsibility of educating his children, and this responsibility is so weighty that Bahá'u'lláh has stated that a father who fails to exercise it forfeits his rights of fatherhood. Similarly, although the primary responsibility for supporting the family financially is placed upon the husband, this does not by any means imply that the place of woman is confined to the home... (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, "Women", p. 385)
12. Bahá'í men have the opportunity to demonstrate to the world around them a new approach to the relationship between the sexes, where aggression and the use of force are eliminated and replaced by cooperation and consultation. The Universal House of Justice has pointed out in response to questions addressed to it that, in a marriage relationship, neither husband nor wife should ever unjustly dominate the other, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other, if agreement cannot be reached through consultation; each couple should determine exactly under what circumstances such deference is to take place. (On behalf of The Universal House of Justice: 1992, "Violence and Sexual Abuse of Women and Children")
13. The House of Justice has...stated that, to use the human temple as the example, if the husband is the head, the wife can well be regarded as the heart of the family. When the husband and the wife work cooperatively and complementarily, the well-being, health and proper functioning of the unit can be ensured. (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: June 24, 1985, to an individual)
14. ...[T]he family is likened to a special kind of community and the term "head" used in such a context, does not confer superiority upon the husband, nor does it give him special rights to undermine the rights of the other members of his family. (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: May 16, 1982, to an individual)
15. **Prayer for Men/Husbands:** O God, my God! This Thy handmaid is calling upon Thee, trusting in Thee, turning her face unto Thee, imploring Thee to shed Thy heavenly bounties upon her, and to disclose unto her Thy spiritual mysteries, and to cast upon her the lights of Thy Godhead.
 O my Lord! Make the eyes of my husband to see. Rejoice Thou his heart with the light of the knowledge of Thee, draw Thou his mind unto Thy luminous beauty, cheer Thou his spirit by revealing unto him Thy manifest splendors.
 O my Lord! Lift Thou the veil from before his sight. Rain down Thy plenteous bounties upon him, intoxicate him with the wine of love for Thee, make him one of Thy angels whose feet walk upon this earth even as their souls are soaring through the high heavens. Cause him to become a brilliant lamp, shining out with the light of Thy wisdom in the midst of Thy people.
 Verily Thou art the Precious, the Ever-Bestowing, the Open of Hand. (ʿAbdu'l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 121)

Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways is equality like the wings of a bird?
 2. What do you see as some of the attributes, roles, or patterns of behavior that differ between men and women? In what ways do these differences balance or complement each other? What patterns between men and women do you see in relationships around you that are not productive?
 3. What is the role of education in achieving equality within a relationship and society?
 4. How can equality within a relationship/marriage help women and men both achieve their “highest individual possibilities”?
 5. What are some of the outcomes of equality?
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Skill-Building: Learning About Women and Men

This activity will help you to explore your personal views of women and men. Answer the questions separately, and then discuss them together. Carefully reflect on your conversations with your own gender *about* the other sex, both when you were growing up and as an adult, and your conversations and contact *with* the other gender. Then answer these questions:

- a. Do you think your attitudes, words, and behaviors reflect equality? In what ways?

- b. What attitudes, words, and behaviors of others have helped to define the perspectives you now hold about men and women?

- c. What prompts you to seek out contact with people of the same gender?

- d. What prompts you to seek out contact with people of the other gender? When you meet someone of the opposite gender, are you straightforward and honest in a desire to understand the “whole person,” or are you focused on his/her physical attributes?

e. What do you believe are facts about how each gender generally acts?

Men: _____

Women: _____

f. Which of your recent words and actions have demonstrated your commitment to equality?

g. Which of your recent words or actions might indicate that you could work more on upholding the principle of equality?
