

Public awareness on Gender-Based Violence

In 1848 in Persia, at a time where women had to fully cover their hair and bodies, Tahirih - a well-known poet and intellectual and the first female believer in the Baha'i dispensation - unveiled herself in a large gathering of men. This was a radical act that shook the people that were present and shocked the entire culture. Tahirih's heroism represents the strong belief of Baha'is in the principle of the equality of women and men. Tahirih was thereafter put to death. Her last words were:

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

Nearly 200 years later, recent protests across Iran have shed light on the current circumstances of women in the country and the state of gender equality worldwide. During the annual United Nations international campaign of 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (GBV), beginning on November 25, 2022, nations around the world as well as non-governmental organisations and other agencies advocated to bring public awareness to Gender-Based Violence (GBV). It was during this time that the 54-member UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted a resolution to remove Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women, due to the government's on-going violation of the rights of women in the country.

GBV is one of the most prevalent human rights violations worldwide. It is estimated that one in three women will experience physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime. In Botswana, over 67% of women have experienced abuse, over double the global average. GBV undermines the health, dignity, security and autonomy of those directly impacted, yet it remains shrouded in a culture of silence and normalisation. Survivors of violence, the majority of whom are women and girls, also suffer sexual and reproductive health consequences, including forced and unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections including HIV and even death.

The Baha'i Office of Public Affairs of Botswana reflects that part of the solution lies in the role of the family unit as "the nucleus of human society" - where the moral capabilities and capacities essential to the betterment and advancement of humanity are developed (www.bahai.org). The family, which seems to be in danger of disappearing and being replaced by varying social arrangements, creates the culture and values that sustain society. It is the space where, from an early age, education about the equality of men and women is essential. Within the family, the rights of all members should be acknowledged and respected, the equality of women and men should be enacted, the advancement of the boy and the girl-child must be equally observed and honoured. There are no prejudices of any kind, and all the members of the family consult on family matters with a spirit of love and unity. These elements build the moral and spiritual foundation from which the members of the family operate in the world.

Thus, the family is not only concerned with their own welfare but, like the nucleus, they work within a system to serve others and contribute to a greater goal - the advancement of a new world civilisation built on principles of justice, equality, fair-mindedness and harmony. These are the values that once so moved Tahirih to sacrifice her life in 1848 for the emancipation of generations of her sisters to come in Iran and worldwide, like those that continue to fight and advocate the advancement of women today. As half of the world's population, there can be no semblance of true progress without the progress of women - rather social and economic development are delayed and overall growth is slowed. The Baha'i Writings exert:

"The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for

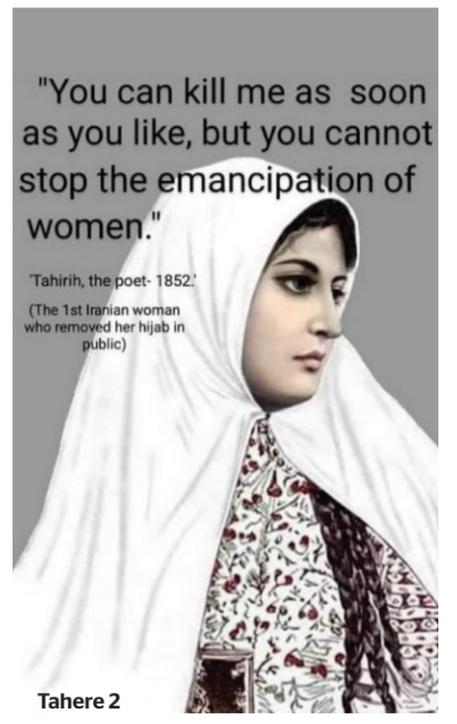
humanity will not be realised; humanity cannot wing its way to heights of real attainment. When the two wings or parts become equivalent in strength, enjoying the same prerogatives, the flight of man will be exceedingly lofty and extraordinary. Therefore, woman must receive the same education as man and all inequality be adjusted.

Thus, imbued with the same virtues as man, rising through all the degrees of human attainment, women will become the peers of men and until this equality is established, true progress and attainment for the human race will not be fa-

cilitated" (Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace).

Thus, it is about bringing change within ourselves in order to transform our communities. If we see one another as part of the same family unit, building from the moral and spiritual foundations informing its operation, we might begin to create a world where GBV cannot exist.

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