

# Book Reviews

*The Equality of Women and Men: The Experience of the Bahá'í Community of Canada.* By Deborah K. van den Hoonaard and Will C. van den Hoonaard. Douglas, New Brunswick: published by the authors, 2006.

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What does the equality of women and men mean to the Canadian Bahá'í community? How is this principle being implemented? These were the questions on the mind of the authors when they responded to the unusual request of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada to find out where Bahá'ís stand on implementing equality. This book is a result of the project and represents the first empirical study of a Bahá'í group to be undertaken by one of the 175 Bahá'í national communities worldwide.

Since it was a qualitative study, the book differs significantly from other Bahá'í publications. Its goal was to present findings arising from discussions among a sample of Bahá'í community members, and to make sense of this data through sociological analysis. It therefore allows for a one-of-a-kind exploration about equality from the viewpoint of grassroots members, as well as an academic perspective.

The van den Hoonaards were motivated by both personal and academic reasons to engage in this study. They were eager to understand how the contemporary community (in the mid-1990s) was handling the struggle to establish equality as a joint mutual effort, and the processes involved in facilitating new patterns of interaction.

There were many challenges in undertaking the project. As they describe it, the equality of women and men is a fundamental verity of the Bahá'í teachings, and, as such, is seen as an unarguable, indisputable fact. There are many passages in the Bahá'í Writings offering guidance about new forms of equality. However, no one knows what equality looks like in contemporary times. They felt, in fact, that they were venturing into

“unknown territory.” Nonetheless, the authors, both sociologists with distinguished academic careers in teaching and research, were well prepared to assume the daunting task. Moreover, because they are married partners and parents, they have seasoned experience and a vested interest in applying this principle in the family, in Bahá'í community life, and in the larger society.

It was an undeniable challenge for the authors to approach Bahá'ís, for many of whom the principle of equality is virtually taken for granted. Thus, they decided to take a qualitative methods approach, engaging 119 participants and eleven facilitators to work with eleven focus groups. These groups were composed of individuals drawn from cities, towns, and villages, and including groups of youth, Persians, and francophones, thus representing a broad cross section of Bahá'í communities across Canada. Each participant was asked to come up with questions which would serve as indicators of equality on an imagined survey. The aim of this approach was to find out how Bahá'ís envision equality.

The book is divided into ten chapters with five appendixes, a bibliography, and an index, and is organized in three sections: the first deals with the social dynamics of the focus groups; the second addresses the issues at the heart of the community—namely family, household, children, youth, encouragement, and discovering harmful habits; the third focuses on how the Bahá'í community relates to the world at large. The introduction provides a brief and helpful overview of the cultural and social background of the participants, some examination of Canadian society at large, and a description of the position of women in early Bahá'í history in Iran and in Canada. Several pages are devoted to reviewing statistics about women's participation in the administrative order in Canada, as well as activities that have been promoted by the national and local Bahá'í communities. The section on research problems is particularly useful as it not only describes the difficulties the authors faced in designing the research project, but also provides a context for understanding the diverse world-views of the participants, their cultural predispositions, and attitudes based on Bahá'í principles.

The book offers a fascinating fly-on-the-wall perspective. A wide range of views is expressed—framed between opposite ends of the spectrum

from “equality doesn’t exist” to “of course, we have equality!” Pepered throughout the text are revealing personal viewpoints that are not often expressed in public, juxtaposed with the van den Hoonaards’ scholarly contextualization of Bahá’ís living in Canadian society.

One intriguing aspect of this work is the close attention paid by the authors to the social dynamics of the groups when they first approached the subject of equality. The reader is given a window on how the participants themselves practiced equality in their own interactions and discussions. For example, the initial interest of participants was to explore numerical representations and measurements of equality. People in eight of the eleven groups first sought to identify statistical measurements of equality by pinpointing those aspects of organized Bahá’í life in which women have parity with men, as well as the nature of participation in both domestic and public affairs; that is, who attends functions, gives talks, looks after the children, speaks more, or attends to household tasks, and what level of education is held by each (40–44).

The authors also took note of gendered interactions heard in the tape recordings made of the each group’s considerations of preset questions. The authors identify seven interactional processes which typically take place in the groups: who talks the most, responding first, interrupting, not affirming, affirming, diverting attention from the topic, asking for clarification, and making closing statements. Not surprisingly, these seven processes parallel the findings of gender communication studies which highlight significant gendered aspects of speech such as power-oriented interruptions, conversational control, affirmatory animation, and purposeful diversion of the subject matter (44–57).

They then examine the areas that confounded or confused the participants, specifically, what a “deeper level” or “larger dimension” of equality might mean beyond statistical measurement (56–97). It is here that the findings become particularly compelling, inasmuch as the authors reveal that the Bahá’ís do not have a uniform orientation toward the equality of men and women. It emerged that there were, in fact, three main orientations of the focus groups toward equality and what the Bahá’í community can do to facilitate it. These ranged from maintaining the status quo and providing equal availability/accessibility to diverse Bahá’í programs

(study classes, and so on), to offering visions of substantial change. In their discussions, the participants tackled such topics as family life and structural change, identifying the Bahá'í Writings that would be particularly applicable to each. Central to these discussions—and the topic most spoken about in preference to all others, the van den Hoonards stress—was the family and Bahá'í consultation, the areas they call “the crown jewels,” indicating the importance placed on these subjects by the participants (238).

While in theory the Bahá'í participants considered consultation to be an area in which the Bahá'í community excels, they also recognized that, in practice, there is a vital need to extend the process of consultation to all spheres of family life, and particularly for couples and families to consult about the equality of men and women. The focus on consultation is expanded and refined as the van den Hoonards analyze the dynamics of the groups, themselves. They found that the interaction of the women and men in the groups illustrated that the Bahá'ís do indeed use a consultative interactional process that is “safe” for the full participation of men and women.

The authors note there were areas the focus groups identified as needing much improvement, ranging from how men maintain stereotypical attitudes and the infrequency of discussions about equality in the community, to not knowing what men's roles should be. Areas of progress included the fact that women feel they can express themselves freely in the Bahá'í community and carry out activities in noncompetitive ways with men. While women had a wider range of examples of how the Bahá'í community was doing well as regards the promotion of equality, men had a smaller range and were more likely to focus on activity in general terms. Both agreed that consultation and discussions about equality in the Bahá'í community are strong factors.

Another intriguing area in the book identifies processes and orientations in the group interactions, and reveals how women and men approached the same topic through perspectives that reflect their social roles in society. For example, women were specific about what men could do that would encourage them, whereas men were more likely to speak in general terms about the importance of encouragement for the wider benefit of future society. And, in the section on family, household, and

children, the women devoted considerable attention to speaking about the aspects of both family and community life that have involved the labor of women in household chores, cleaning, and hospitality, while the men were more likely to dwell on such areas as the Bahá'í Fund, the holding of schools and conferences, and service projects. The authors observe that both women and men look at the community along gendered lines and until that is changed the implementation of equality will be further delayed.

While there has been some small success on the home front, ambivalence and caution are two words the authors use to identify the orientation of the focus groups about the Bahá'í community and its interactions, both formal and informal, with the world at large. Bahá'í programs and projects with non-Bahá'í groups have been modest, and the authors present several reasons why this might be so. These findings lead them to the conclusion that the Bahá'í community is still inward looking.

Any visions of equality, the van den Hoonards suggest, are conjured up through a patriarchal legacy. In this regard, they mention the social and cultural baggage which people bring to their view of the world, citing Margaret Eichler's twelve social dimensions in which equality is minimal, such as men's control over property, their privileged access to goods and services, exposure to violence, and asymmetry in affective relationships (6). It might have been helpful if the authors had extended their analysis to explain the foundations of this legacy, which has embedded in Western—and not only Western—civilization and cultures inherited ideologies about women's nature and creation from both philosophy (such as Aristotle) and religion (such as human interpretations of Genesis enforced in scriptural and cultural traditions). These ideologies deemed women inferior in mind, body, and spirit, and in varying ways both silenced them and disallowed their participation in the public sphere. In contrast, men's nature, biological creation, and abilities of mind were considered superior by thinkers in both religion and philosophy; hence men's occupation of and dominance in the public sphere was seen as natural and necessary, with the result that their work was given greater value and prestige.

A clearer appreciation of this damaging legacy might have enabled the

reader of this work to more readily grasp the magnitude of the problem, and to draw parallels between what the society at large and the Bahá'í community are attempting to overcome and transform.

Obviously we still live in the shadow of these stereotypical beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Indeed, a summary of the comments from the focus groups indicates that these ideas are still very much alive, for example, when women are told by some men that their consultation is not rational, logical, or valid if they speak with emotion, when some men employ strategies to maintain the traditional division of labor to their benefit, and when Bahá'í women say they need to *ask* for assistance in the private sphere. The authors point out that men are more engaged in the general and public aspects of Bahá'í life, rather than in the domestic and child-rearing realm. Of course, this orientation also reflects the "two spheres" dichotomy, although it should be noted that there was some mention in the focus groups of "cross over tasks" being taken up by a few men.

The Bahá'í Writings offer a completely different worldview, and passages by 'Abdu'l-Bahá are particularly helpful when He directly discusses and refutes these ancient ideologies (for example, *Promulgation* 133). The van den Hoonards did include a revealing section in which the focus groups responded to the question, "How can we discover those habits which maintain inequality (131)?" Little background discussion is offered, however, concerning the extent to which these attitudes and behaviors are institutionalized in society, except to say that the process involves "reexamining suppositions and habits of thought we have grown accustomed to since earliest childhood (131)." If the authors had been able to point to relevant feminist literature on this topic, it would have been especially helpful. For example, readers can expand their understanding through some of the classic works, such as Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*; Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*; de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; French, *Beyond Power*; Hamilton and Barrett, *The Politics of Diversity*; and recent texts such as Anderson, *Thinking About Women*; Wood, *Gendered Lives*; and Mandell, *Feminist Issues* (a Canadian book).

In fairness to the authors, it must be said that it would have been a challenge to both provide a report of their findings, including extensive analysis, and incorporate relevant literature. They remark on this fact and

point out that there are few, if any other, studies that have examined communities, movements, or groups that are trying to implement a new vision of equality.

Another area that warrants a comment is the absence of a First Nations focus group. The authors mentioned that, despite their best efforts, it was not possible to get together a First Nations group. This is truly unfortunate, as it would have been very informative to have heard the views of First Nation Bahá'ís, especially those that come from matrilineal clan systems and have knowledge, within living memory, of complementary duties and support between men and women in their communities.

For reasons beyond the authors' control, the publication of this book has been delayed many years after the completion of the study. Therefore, when considering their findings, it must be taken into account that new influences, activities, and events have occurred in the past ten years that have, one hopes, affected the participants, and in general, have heightened awareness and action about equality in the Bahá'í community. For example, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada opened an Office for the Advancement of Women in Quebec City in 2002. This initiative has surely had some influence in how the topic is perceived, particularly since this office publishes reports of its activities in *Bahá'í Canada*. The involvement of the Bahá'í community in promoting the equality of men and women internationally has also been covered in *Bahá'í Canada*, as have conference seminars and published proceedings from the Association for Bahá'í Studies. The National Spiritual Assembly also encourages local communities to observe International Women's Day and to organize such events with like-minded groups. One hopes that future scholars will take up where the van den Hoonards have left off in ascertaining whether and how these activities and Bahá'í media have contributed to a positive change in perception and behavior.

These points aside, for people who are not familiar with the Bahá'í community, this book will provide interesting facts as well as evidence that the Bahá'ís are, indeed, engaged in a joint effort to realize the principle of equality. Not only does it offer a window into how traditional roles are maintained, but also hopeful commentary on the potential for radical change. For Bahá'ís, the book advances the discussion about equality and

provides a template for communities and individuals to complete the questionnaire and engage in consultation. This engaging and readable study is a welcome addition to literature on the Bahá'í community and will also be of interest to people in the social sciences, particularly the sociology of religion, women's studies, and gender studies.

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