

## Article

# The Bahá'í Faith and the Equality, Rights, and Advancement of Women: A Survey of Principles, Praxis, and Discourse

Wendi Momen

Governor Emeritus, London School of Economics, London WC2A 2AE, UK; wendi@momen.org

**Abstract:** This article examines the Bahá'í approach to the equality of women and men, the education, advancement, and rights of women and girls; their application within the Bahá'í community; and the efforts of the Bahá'ís to influence the international discourse on women. Focusing on significant and interrelated social issues—the education of girls; leadership and participation in decision-making, and violence against women and girls—the article explores these through Bahá'í texts, accounts, and examples of how these have been operationalized by Bahá'í institutions, communities, and individuals; and in public statements made by Bahá'í institutions.

**Keywords:** Baha'i; Bahá'í International Community; equality; girl child; leadership; participation; rights; Universal House of Justice; violence against women and girls; women

## 1. Introduction

The advancement of women and their possession of rights is, within the Bahá'í Faith, an essential aspect of the overall purpose of humanity: the recognition of the oneness of humanity and the responsibility of each individual to 'carry forward an ever-advancing civilization' (Bahá'u'lláh 1983, p. 215). Some of the preliminary elements required for such a civilization were beginning to be assembled in the 18th and 19th centuries, including increasing awareness and concern about social issues such as slavery, race, poverty, class, criminal justice, education, temperance, work and employment, moral reform, democracy, and the decline and revival of religion.<sup>1</sup>

The movements for greater social justice and women's rights coincided in part with the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran in the middle of the 19th century. The religion spoke directly to the social issues of the day, treating them not as separate concerns but as interwoven threads of the fabric of a society that needed to reform and evolve. It recognized that religion has a social responsibility ('divine religions were founded for the purpose of unifying humanity and establishing universal peace'. 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, no. 41.1) as well as well as a spiritual and moral one and that religion is 'capable of profoundly influencing the structure of social relationships' (Universal House of Justice 2002). A foundational concept of the Bahá'í teachings is the equality of women and men.

The Bahá'í teachings and experience of implementation cover a vast range of endeavours from the education of girls, family life, health, work and careers, women's participation in governance and decision-making, to their role in bringing about peace and dealing with climate change, to name a few. Space does not permit an examination of more than a handful and therefore this article limits itself to an examination of four themes that are high on the feminist agenda: equality of women and men; education of the girl child; leadership and participation; and violence against women and girls. They are illustrative of the wider effort of the Bahá'ís to reshape the whole of human society so as to carry out the social mission of Bahá'u'lláh for which humans were created: 'to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization' (Bahá'u'lláh 1983, p. 215).

With regard to each of these four themes, the present article examines three elements of the Bahá'í focus on women: the underlying principles of the religion as expressed in



**Citation:** Momen, Wendi. 2023. The Bahá'í Faith and the Equality, Rights, and Advancement of Women: A Survey of Principles, Praxis, and Discourse. *Religions* 14: 491. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040491>

Academic Editors: Moojan Momen and Zackery Mirza Heern

Received: 21 February 2023

Revised: 14 March 2023

Accepted: 20 March 2023

Published: 4 April 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

its scriptures, the authoritative explanations and elucidations of these, as well as certain supplementary texts; the efforts to implement these principles and the experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community in doing so; and the discourse of the Bahá'ís in advocating the use of Bahá'í concepts in social spaces, based on both their principles and experience.

For clarity, the structure of the article, following the Introduction (1) is:

Section 2. Theme A: Equality of women and men; Section 2.1. Bahá'í texts; Section 2.2. Praxis; Section 2.3. Discourse.

Section 3. Theme B: Education of the girl child; Section 3.1. Bahá'í texts; Section 3.2. Praxis; Section 3.3. Discourse.

Section 4. Theme C: Leadership and Participation; Section 4.1. Bahá'í texts; Section 4.2. Praxis; Section 4.3. Discourse.

Section 5. Theme D: Violence against Women and Girls; Section 5.1. Bahá'í texts; Section 5.2. Praxis; Section 5.3. Discourse.

It is well to note that the Bahá'í Faith is not a development agency but a religion with many aspects and dimensions, only a few of which are touched on here. (For the Bahá'ís' own explanation of themselves, see [Bahá'í Faith 2023](#)), and for their literature, see [Bahá'í Reference Library 2023](#)).

### 1.1. Historical Context

The campaign for women's rights and equality was born at a time when many men did not have a full range of such rights, when the disparities of wealth, education, status, and power within a population were considered normal and appropriate by many and were driven by factors such as class, race, cast, and religion and depended largely where in the world a person was born.

The women's movement initially focused on the demand of women that they be able to exercise the same rights and privileges as men, notably the right to vote. This was primarily a Western phenomenon, although India also witnessed, among the many social reform movements in the 19th century, an uptick in efforts to promote the welfare and rights of women, some led by men (see e.g., [Kumar 1993](#); [Anagol 2006](#)). Elsewhere, for example, in Japan, Argentina, and Ecuador, a few advocated for women's rights.

The leadership of the early women's movement in the West was dominated by Western, educated white women of some degree of personal or family wealth and social standing, while, 'thousands of working class women . . . formed the bedrock of the fight for women's suffrage in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the early unions and organizations of Suffragists were centred in working class areas' ([Hicks 2017](#)). Racial diversity in the early movement was limited, mirroring to some extent the lack of racial diversity in the general population. It was not an inclusive grouping of different economic or social classes, races, or religions.

### 1.2. Role of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Promoting the Equality, Rights, Participation, and Activism of Women

'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh and understood by Bahá'ís to be the 'perfect exemplar' of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and designated by Bahá'u'lláh as the interpreter of his writings, came to the United Kingdom twice, first from 4 September to 3 October 1911 and again from 13 December 1912 to 21 January 1913. During his first visit, he spoke to numerous people and groups, giving his first public address in the West in the City Temple in London on 10 September. On 30 September, he spoke at the new headquarters of the Theosophical Society. In this address, he listed nine of the Bahá'í social teachings. This appears to be the first time such a list had been made ([Thorne et al. 2023](#)). The first was the search for truth and second the oneness of humanity. In his brief comments on this latter topic, he said, 'Man and woman both should be educated equally and equally regarded' ('[Abdu'l-Bahá 1987](#), p. 28).

In 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá travelled in North America, giving public lectures, private interviews, and newspaper interviews. In many such spaces, he discussed female suffrage, the equality of women and men, the advancement and rights of women, and the education

of women and girls. These travels are well documented (see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982; Maḥmūd-i-Zarqání 1998; Egea 2017, 2018; McNamara 2021). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s oral statements, which although not scripture and not ‘authoritative’, are accepted by Bahá’ís as interpretations of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings and to be important sources of guidance, greatly expanded knowledge of the Bahá’í Faith view of women and girls.

### 1.3. Some Basic Concepts in the Bahá’í Texts Regarding Women and Girls

The Bahá’í authoritative texts and the talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá contain many passages that relate directly to women and girls. These are understood by Bahá’ís in the context of the religion’s world view of the oneness of humanity; its vision of an ever-advancing, peaceful, united, and sustainable civilization that is at once material, spiritual, and intellectual (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1967, no. 1; Universal House of Justice 1995b, 1996a); and its explanation that the nature of the human being is essentially spiritual and every individual is created noble. These concepts are interwoven in such a way that isolating them from one another seems to distort their meaning and application. In the present context, the establishment of world peace, justice, the education of girls, the importance of mothers, and the assertion of the equality of women and men appear to be essential elements of operationalizing the Bahá’í approach to humanity’s progress. For example, not only do women have a role in bringing about peace as individuals, the lack of women’s equality with men is considered to be a destabilizing influence on world politics.

Equality between men and women is conducive to the abolition of warfare for the reason that women will never be willing to sanction it. Mothers will not give their sons as sacrifices upon the battlefield after twenty years of anxiety and loving devotion in rearing them from infancy, no matter what cause they are called upon to defend. There is no doubt that when women obtain equality of rights, war will entirely cease among mankind (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, no. 62:7).

### 1.4. Basic Concepts

Thus in the survey below, the quotations cited as the possible inspiration of particular Bahá’í practices and discourses have been selected merely as examples of some key feminist issues addressed in Bahá’í texts, such as political participation and representation, the education of the girl child, and violence against women and girls. To frame these, some basic concepts about women are set out below.

#### 1.4.1. Nature and Qualities of Women

Mental alertness, intuition, love, and service (Dodge 1912); ‘in some respects woman is superior to man, more tender-hearted, more receptive’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1967, p. 161); ‘woman is indeed of the greater importance to the race. She has the greater burden and the greater work’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1987, p. 102).

#### 1.4.2. Equality of Women and Men

‘Bahá’u’lláh emphasized and established the equality of man and woman’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, no. 63:20).

#### 1.4.3. Rights of Women

Women will go ‘neck and neck with the men. In no movement will they be left behind. Their rights with men are equal in degree. They will enter all the administrative branches of politics. They will attain in all such a degree as will be considered the very highest station of the world of humanity and will take part in all affairs’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1967, pp. 182–3).

#### 1.4.4. Respect

The rights of both sexes are to equally respected (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1967, p. 162).

#### 1.4.5. Work

Work undertaken in the spirit of service is considered worship. It ‘incumbent’ on Bahá’ís to each ‘engage in some occupation—such as a craft, a trade or the like’ (Bahá’u’lláh 1992, para. 33), ‘agriculture or other occupation’ (Bahá’u’lláh 1978, p. 90) which will ‘profit themselves and others’, and which may be undertaken outside the home environment by both women and men. Homemaking is considered to ‘highly honourable’ and ‘responsible work of fundamental importance to society’ and may be undertaken by both women and men (Bahá’u’lláh 1992, n. 56).

#### 1.4.6. Education of Women and Girls

Women are particularly encouraged to become ‘proficient in the arts and sciences’ and ‘devote her energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences, seeking to assist mankind in that which is most needful’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, no. 95.11). Girls have priority of education over boys, as the ‘girl-child is the transmitter of values to future generations. Indeed, educated women are one of the most important keys to world peace’ (BIC 2000).

#### 1.4.7. Peace

Women will prevent war when they ‘participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, when they enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, no. 51.6). They have the dual responsibility of ushering in peace and maintaining it.

#### 1.4.8. Harmful Traditional Practices

Female genital mutilation of girls (FGM, female circumcision, cutting) is ‘contrary to the spirit of the Bahá’í Teachings’. (Universal House of Justice 1995a).

#### 1.4.9. Marriage

The Bahá’í Faith does not permit forced or child marriage or the betrothal of a girl before maturity (Bahá’u’lláh 1992, pp. 120, 149–50; spiritual maturity is fixed at age 15 for both girls and boys). Arranged marriages are not permissible for Bahá’ís: ‘the initial choice of marriage partner is made by the two individuals directly involved, and the consent of all living parents is then sought, and is required for the marriage to take place (Universal House of Justice 1988b; Bahá’u’lláh 1992, para. 65)

#### 1.4.10. Inheritance

Bahá’ís are required to make a will and both women and girls can inherit. If the deceased has not left a will, the Bahá’í law of intestacy provides for the inheritance of female relatives (Bahá’u’lláh 1992, para. 109, question 69, and notes 38 and 39).

### 1.5. Bahá’í Contribution to the Discourses of Society: The Discourse on Women and Girls

Bahá’ís hold that participating in the prevalent global, national, and local conversations that take place in society on a number of topics concerned with the well-being of the planet and humanity—the ‘discourses of society’—is a useful way to be an effective actor in an ‘ever-advancing civilization’, the participation in which process Bahá’u’lláh stated is the purpose of humanity’s creation (Bahá’u’lláh 1983, p. 215). Of particular interest here is the discourse on women and girls, which has been a focus of Bahá’í endeavour for over a hundred years.

#### 1.5.1. The Discourse in Iran

The discourse on women and girls at the inception of the Bábí religion in 1844 (Balyuzi 1973; Bahá’í Faith 2022a, 2023), the precursor of the Bahá’í Faith, centred on the figure of Tāhirih (Fātimah Baraghānī/Umm-i Salmih, also titled Qurrat al-‘Ayn), the influential poet and scholar who energetically and fearlessly taught the new religion, tore away her

veil at the gathering of male Bábís at the 1848 Conference of Badasht), and was killed by order of the religious clerics in 1852 ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1971, pp. 201, 202–3; Nabil-i-A'zam 1970, pp. 294–5, 625–7; Amanat 2004, pp. 139–40, 143; M. Momen 2005). She is reported to have said before being strangled with her own scarf, lowered into a well and covered with earth and stones, 'You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women' (Shoghi Effendi 1995, p. 75). Her story became the subject of conversations in artistic circles and *salons* in Europe and America (see e.g., Weinberg 2019; Khademi 2022, pp. 49, 121–9, 152) and was the focus of Isabella Grinevskaya's play *Bab* about the founder of the Bábí religion (Jasion 2004, pp. 231–8).

The discourse about the education of women and girls in Iran was a subset of the discourse on the modernization of the country, a project undertaken by Mirza Taqi Khan, Amir Kabir Nezam, Prime Minister to Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (Shah of Persia) between May 1848 and November 1851. A nemesis to the emerging Bábí community (he ordered the killing of the religion's founder, the Báb, in 1850 and of thousands of Bábís, see Shoghi Effendi 1995, p. 82), history recalls him as 'pioneer' of modernization (Shahriari 2017, 7.269), a 'celebrated minister', later 'elevated to the pantheon of Iranian national heroes' (Amanat and Vejdani 2012, pp. 135–6). Among his efforts was the establishment of the Dar al-Fanun (Skills House), a modern, secular training centre for government administrators, aspects of which later became part of the University of Tehran. It was modelled after schools in Russia, which Amir Kabir saw in the 1820s (Menashri 2020) and underscored the importance of education in the modernization process.

An early contributor to this discourse was 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In his political treatise written in 1875, addressed to Iran's leaders, and published, anonymously, as *Risálih-yi madaniyyih* (Treatise on Civilization), initially published in English as *The Mysterious Forces of Civilization* ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1910) and latterly as *The Secret of Divine Civilization* ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1990), he discusses the value of modernization to the modern state and draws attention to the role of education in the process.

In response to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement of Bahá'í communities in Iran to establish the institutions of their religion, local administrative councils known as 'local spiritual assemblies' began to form at the end of the 19th century and early in the 20th. Among the first steps taken by these bodies was the creation of schools, initially for boys but soon for girls as well.

In the 20th and 21st centuries one of the main discourses in the Western media regarding Iran focused on the plight of the persecuted Bahá'í community. Persecution of the Bahá'í community was endemic in the country but became acute following the Islamic revolution in 1979, when large numbers of Bahá'ís were executed, imprisoned, beaten, dispossessed of their homes, stripped of their pensions, summarily dismissed from their jobs, and young people prevented from attending institutions of higher education (see e.g., Vahman 2019, pp. 160–270; BIC 2022b). The execution of over 200 Bahá'ís, particularly the hanging of 10 Bahá'í women—one a high school student—in 1983 highlighted to the world community the country's human rights abuses against women and girls (Community under Siege 2007).

The Universal House of Justice has written to the Bahá'ís of Iran on several occasions in the four decades since on a range of topics relating to the resilience of the persecuted community. Its letter of 20 June 2008 focused on the equality of women and men, highlighting 'the critical need to remove barriers hindering the progress of women in society', noting: 'For you, the equality of men and women is not a Western construct but a universal spiritual truth—a statement about human nature . . . That women should enjoy equal rights with men is a requirement of justice . . . For half a century now, Bahá'í women in Iran have worked shoulder to shoulder with men in administering the affairs of the community . . . And long ago you succeeded in eliminating in your community illiteracy among women under the age of forty' (Universal House of Justice 2008).

The discourse in Iran took another negative turn in 2022, with a crackdown on Bahá'ís over several weeks starting in June with widespread arrests and the destruction of homes,



backed by a formal statement from the Ministry of Intelligence on 1 August claiming those targeted were ‘core members’ of the ‘Baha’i espionage party’, were ‘infiltrating educational environments’ including kindergartens, possibly an excuse for the persecution of teachers of preschoolers, and that they ‘were also promoting a campaign of women’s unveiling in Iran’ (Reuters 2022). Among those arrested were Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi, two Bahá’í women formerly imprisoned for 10 years each and recently released (BIC 2022a). They were sentenced to a further 10 years of imprisonment on 21 November 2022. Ironically, the first Bahá’í to be appointed as Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief by the Human Rights Council, Ms Nazila Ghanea of the United Kingdom, took up her mandate on 1 August 2022 (United Nations 2022b).

The street demonstrations across Iran following the death in September 2022 of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who was detained and beaten by the ‘morality police’ for not covering her hair sufficiently, recalled the protest of women in response to Khomeini’s announcement in 1979 reintroducing the requirement for women to veil and could be said to have begun in earnest on 27 December 2017 when Vida Movahedi (Movahed), mother and women’s rights activist, stood on a utility box in Enghelab Street, holding her white hijab on a stick in protest against wearing the hijab in Iran. This action was copied by numerous others, including men, and she was arrested and sentenced to one year in prison, though later pardoned (Radio Free Europe 2019; WLUM 2022).

Street demonstrations regarding women’s rights continued across Iran into December, commentators stating that ‘current protests are unique, as they involve people from across society and women are taking a lead role under the slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom”’ (BBC News 2022). *Time* magazine named ‘The Women of Iran’ as ‘Heroes of the Year’ (Time 2022b) and the Irish magazine *The Journal* published Brendan McNamara’s article ‘Iran’s nod to International Human Rights Day was more repression of its people’, pointing out that two of those heroic women were Mahvash Sabet (69) and Fariba Kamalabadi (60), Bahá’í women ‘who have consistently upheld and promoted the equality of women and men, called for justice and truth for all and have paid a heavy price for upholding these principles’ (McNamara 2022).

International support for the women of Iran has been demonstrated by the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which voted to eject Iran from its membership in light of its efforts ‘to continuously undermine and increasingly suppress the human rights of women and girls’, and ‘often with the use of excessive force’ (UN News 2022; IranWire 2022b), thus extending the discourse on the rights of women to the global level.

### 1.5.2. The Discourse in Europe and North America

The early Bahá’í contribution to the discourse on women and girls in Europe and North America may be understood as a product of the guidance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to individuals and the emerging Bahá’í institutions during his travels between 1911 and 1913. I have discussed his contribution to these audiences elsewhere (W. Momen 1995) and described the role of Emmeline Pethick Lawrence (see Brittain 1963) in articulating a vision of the equality of women and men as the two wings of a bird, a metaphor frequently used by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and one widely adopted as the preeminent description of the concept (W. Momen 2018; see also Ford 1912). That article set out some of the themes he developed as he travelled: equality, women’s suffrage, the advancement of women and peace, women as educators of the next generation, and the education of girls.

While he was still on the RMS *Cedric* before docking in New York on 11 April 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was interviewed by reporters, including the Bahá’í Wendell Phillips Dodge, whose interview was carried in numerous newspapers (see Egea 2017, p. 623). Dodge notes that one of the reporters asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘What is your attitude toward woman suffrage?’ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá responded:

The modern suffragette is fighting for what must be, and many of these are willing martyrs to imprisonment for their cause. One might not approve of the ways of some of the more militant suffragettes, but in the end it will adjust itself.

If women were given the same advantages as men, their capacity being the same, the result would be the same. In fact, women have a superior disposition to men; they are more receptive, more sensitive, and their intuition is more intense. The only reason of their present backwardness in some directions is because they have not had the same educational advantages as men.

All children should be educated, but if parents cannot educate both the boys and the girls, then it would be better to educate the girls, for they will be the mothers of the coming generation . . . 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 scales are already shifting—force is losing its weight 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 properly balanced. (Dodge 1912, p. 4)<sup>2</sup>

It is not known how many people ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke to on his journeys, but his first public address in the West (at London’s City Temple on 10 September 1911) alone attracted over 2000 people (Egea 2017, p. 109). Thousands more would have read about the Bahá’í teachings in the newspapers and journals that carried news of his speeches. His participation in many of the discourses of the day was significant yet the ability of people to appreciate his contribution was perhaps limited:

... only a small number of those who had accepted the Faith—and infinitely fewer among the public audiences who had thronged to hear His words—derived from these priceless opportunities more than a relatively dim understanding of the implications of His message (Century of Light 2001, p. 25).

### 1.5.3. Contributions to the Discourse on Women through Global Institutions The League of Nations

Following World War I, the Paris Peace Conference that formally ended the war included negotiations for what became the Treaty of Versailles. The Covenant of the League of Nations formed part I of the Treaty. It was signed on 28 June 1919 and came into effect on 10 January 1920 (Treaty of Peace with Germany 1919, called Treaty of Versailles, Part I). Established ‘In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security’ (Part 1), the League was described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his ‘Tablet to the Hague’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1919), a letter written to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace, as ‘limited and restricted’, whose ‘purpose will not be realized as it ought and should’ and which was therefore ‘incapable of establishing Universal Peace’. Despite its shortcomings, the League of Nations was supported by the Bahá’ís as a stage in the development of their vision of a peaceful world civilization, Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and after him the head of the religion, apparently stating ‘that the League is not on the foundation that it should be to be the ultimate league, but that it will develop into that. As far as possible, without becoming involved in politics Bahá’ís should support it’ (Paine and Paine 1933, p. 145). It is perhaps worth noting that Article 7 of the Covenant of the League states: ‘All positions under or in connection with the League, including the Secretariat, shall be open equally to men and women’—this at a time when most women in the world did not yet have voting rights on a par with men.

The relationship of the Bahá’ís with the League of Nations developed in two related directions: one was the work that Laura Dreyfus Barney undertook as an individual with the League, including through her membership of the International Council of Women. The other was the relationship developed between the International Bahá’í Bureau and the League at the institutional level. The work of Dreyfus Barney, a wealthy American Bahá’í

philanthropist and women's rights champion, is well documented in Mona Khademi's (2022) *The Life of Laura Barney*.

#### The International Bahá'í Bureau

The International Bahá'í Bureau was established in Geneva in 1925, primarily to assist the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith in Europe. It served as a secretariat to the Bahá'í communities around the world and was a distribution centre for information on the religion. The Bureau was begun by Mrs Jean Stannard as an 'auxiliary' to the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa (Hoagg 1933, pp. 257–61) and over the years was staffed by a number of Bahá'ís, mostly women (Warde 1952, pp. 507–9).

The Bureau's second responsibility was to contribute to the discourse on international themes and current issues, including those affecting women, through the development and maintenance of international contacts at the League and the provision of information. This involved both attendance at the public sessions of the League of Nations and cooperation with those international organizations that were not involved with partisan politics. A persistent effort was made to inform international workers about the Bahá'í social teachings, including the equality of women and men. It offered lectures on international subjects, sometimes with Bahá'í speakers, and side programmes of the Esperanto Congresses of 1925 and 1926, which were held in the Bureau's rooms. It was during these conferences that Lidia Zamenhof, daughter of the creator of Esperanto Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, first heard of the Bahá'í Faith, which she later joined (see Heller 1985). The Bureau also produced *Messenger Bahá'í*, begun by Stannard and printed in three languages—English, French, and German.

The Bureau maintained correspondence with a number of individuals, agencies, and organizations functioning as a centre of accurate information about the Bahá'í Faith. It translated Bahá'í literature into European languages, including Russian and Esperanto, and distributed it. Free literature was given away to inquirers, while Bahá'í books were sold and distributed. Much Bahá'í literature was given to journalists, internationalists, and diplomats. The Bureau also maintained a free reading and lending library, while hundreds of Bahá'í books were placed in libraries throughout Europe.

In 1925, the Bureau was recognized by the League of Nations and became a member of the Fédération des Mouvements Internationaux, on the strength of the international scope of its work. In 1930, the Bureau was registered as an international working unit governed by a committee under the direct supervision of Shoghi Effendi.

After the establishment of the Bahá'í International Community (see below) in 1948, much of the work of the International Bahá'í Bureau was taken over by it. The Bureau finally closed in 1957 (Bahá'í News 1966, p. 2). One of the offices of the Bahá'í International Community opened in Geneva in 1981.

#### The Bahá'í International Community (BIC)

The main Bahá'í participant in the international arena over the last seven decades has been the Bahá'í International Community (BIC 2023a), established in 1948 as an international non-governmental organization (NGO) with the United Nations, initially with observer status, achieving consultative status in July 1970, and representing all the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assemblies. It holds accredited consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and has offices in New York, Geneva, Brussels, Addis Ababa, and Jakarta.

For decades cited as a significant principle of the Bahá'í teachings, the equality of women and men, particularly the concept of privileging girls' education, took on greater importance in many national Bahá'í communities as second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, the 'Women's Liberation Movement', spread and developed. The focus of the Movement on equality was of particular interest to Bahá'ís especially during International Women's Year (1975) and the International Year of the Child (1979). By the 1990s, the discourse was well-established in local Bahá'í communities. In the 21st century, individual



Bahá'ís incorporated the theme into their 'meaningful conversations' as encouraged to do so by the Universal House of Justice (see, for example, [Universal House of Justice 2005](#)).

An example of how the Bahá'ís influenced discourse about women and girls at the international level is provided by the development over several decades of the relationship of the Bahá'í community with the United Nations ([Holley 1952](#), pp. 42–3).

Initially, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada applied to the UN for recognition as a national non-governmental organization, and accredited observer status was obtained in spring 1947 in the name of 'The Bahá'í International Community'. At the same time, Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, received a letter on 9 July 1947 from the chairman of United Nations Special Committee on Palestine requesting a statement on the relationship the Bahá'í Faith had to Palestine and the Bahá'í attitude towards any future changes in the status of the country. Shoghi Effendi responded on 15 July 1947 setting out the Bahá'í teachings ([Shoghi Effendi 1947a](#)).

As an official UN observer, the BIC submitted two formal statements: 'A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights' ([BIC 1947a](#)) and 'A Bahá'í Statement on the Rights of Women', submitted to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, August 1947 ([BIC 1947b](#)).

The BIC was first represented at an international UN conference in May 1948 at Geneva, where international non-governmental organizations gathered to discuss human rights. The Bahá'í delegates introduced two resolutions, which were accepted:

RESOLVED: That the Non-Governmental Organizations endeavor through their local branches and with the permission of the governing authorities to educate and prepare the peoples of nonmember nations for their eventual entry into the United Nations.

RESOLVED: That the Non-Governmental Organizations who here represent a good portion of the world's population can go far in the implementation of Article No. 1 of the Declaration of Human Rights by themselves setting the example within their own organization by eliminating within these organizations all sorts of prejudice whether it be that of race, creed or color. They would thus present a living example of the implementation of Article No. 1 ([Holley 1952](#), p. 43; [BIC 2023b](#)).

The Bahá'í International Community applied for consultative status to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on many occasions (see, for example, [United Nations 1948a](#), p. 202) and was successful in 1970. It has held full consultative status with ECOSOC since 1996, when UN policy changed ([Global Policy Forum 1996](#); [Lempinen 1999](#)) to enable international non-governmental organizations to do so. In 1974, the BIC established a relationship with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and in 1976 it gained consultative status with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Its representation with the United Nations Center for Human Settlements (UNCHS) was formalized in 1985.

Over the years, the BIC has focused on a wide range of discourses within the United Nations system relating to women and the girl child, education, family life, and the role of men and boys, among many others, examples of which are discussed below.

There are several themes regarding women in the Bahá'í texts including peace, social and economic development, and the environment. Space restricts the number that can be explored here and I have therefore focused on those that represent perhaps the most well developed from the point of view of implementation and global discourse but which are also high on the feminist agenda: equality of women and men, the education of the girl child, women's leadership and political participation, and violence against women and girls. As mentioned above, these are set out to provide a few of the relevant Bahá'í texts, examples of the social application of the texts, and some of the Bahá'í contributions to the discourse on each theme.

## 2. Theme A: Equality of Women and Men

### 2.1. Bahá'í Texts

And among the teachings of His Holiness 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 ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in [Bahá'í World Faith 1976](#), p. 288).

Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible . . . And let it be known once more that until woman and man recognize and realize equality, social and political progress here or anywhere will not be possible. For the world of humanity consists of two parts or members: one is woman; the other is man. Until these two members are equal in strength, the oneness of humanity cannot be established, and the happiness and felicity of mankind will not be a reality ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, no. 32.8).

### 2.2. Praxis

Michael Karlberg, professor of communication studies at Western Washington University, noted how Bahá'ís have implemented their teachings:

Consider, for instance, the Bahá'í community's long-standing commitment to the advancement of women, and to the equality of women and men, in the context of deeply patriarchal forces that are still at play in many parts of the world. In such contexts, Bahá'ís have been among the first to reject the forced veiling of women, to declare the full equality of women and men, and to begin translating this principle into practice in every arena of family and community life by prioritizing the education of girls, fostering professional and administrative capacities in women, and empowering women to become protagonists of social change within their societies. Not surprisingly, this unwavering commitment to the equality of women and men has been used, in some countries, as a pretext for ongoing calumnies and assaults against Bahá'ís ([Karlberg 2022](#)).

Regarding the veiling of women, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said on 6 August 1912 at a talk in Dublin, New Hampshire:

All women in Persia are enveloped in veils in public. So completely covered are they that even the hand is not visible. This rigid veiling is unspeakable ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, no. 88.13).

This was almost a quarter of a century before Reza Shah, king of Iran, issued a decree banning all forms of Islamic veils in public, on 8 January 1936 (Kashf-e hijab, which included the headscarf—hijab—and the cloth that covers the head, most of the face and the whole body—the chador, not to be confused with the burqa, which is an outer garment, covering the whole of the head and body). The chador is particularly disabling for women, as it has no fasteners and has to be held by hand under the chin, thus preventing women from undertaking many physical tasks. It seems it was the chador that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was particularly referring to, although in general Bahá'í women are not veiled in any way unless required to be so by the law of the land.

The law requiring veiling was reinstated during the Islamic revolution in Iran when on 7 March 1979, the day before International Women's Day, Ruhollah Khomeini, later to become the supreme ruler, announced that all women must wear the hijab in public. More than 40 years later, the women of Iran were still chaffing at the ruling, leading to months of street demonstrations by women and men following the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the 'morality police' for failing to comply with the law. The Bahá'ís were caught up in the government's backlash, as they were in 1979, with arbitrary arrests and imprisonment.

### 2.2.1. The Bahá'í Training Institute

Since 1996, the worldwide Bahá'í community has been embarked on a programme of training for all its adherents and others to build the capacity of individuals to apply the Bahá'í teachings to the development and transformation of society. Incorporated into the programme is training around social action at both a conceptual level and a practical one as people in a neighbourhood begin to apply Bahá'í concepts and practices, such as the moral and spiritual education of children and 'junior youth' (aged 12 through 14 years), in programmes run primarily by themselves. Included in these efforts is this guidance: 'the principle of equality between the sexes must inform social action in general—that is, every project must manifest this truth in every aspect of its operation' ([Ruhi Institute 2020](#)). It further notes that 'In the case of the widespread injustice being perpetrated against "one half of the world's population", the transformation that must occur in the structures sustaining human life on earth—social, economic, political, and cultural—as well as in collective consciousness, is so profound that the equality of women and men will surely need to remain an unrelenting concern of every Bahá'í endeavour for the foreseeable future.'

### 2.2.2. Barli Development Institute for Rural Women, Indore, India

Established in 1985, the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women (formerly the Bahá'í Vocational Institute for Rural Women) was set up to provide rural and tribal women from villages around Indore with the skills and knowledge they needed to improve the quality of their lives, their families and communities. About 200 women a year attend a six-month programme of development activities focused on improving health and nutrition, raising household income, increasing literacy, and environmental protection and improvement. Over the years, Barli has extended its programme to include education in women's rights and conflict resolution skills, as well as solar cooking, organic farming, and tailoring. Barli graduates also undertake a service programme, some working at health centres, others teaching children's classes and planting trees to improve the environment. The programme enables women to earn a living and has thus raised their status in the eyes of their families and communities, which the Barli Institute notes has increased the general understanding of the equality of women and men locally. As of 2022, more than 8500 women from about 800 villages have attended Barli's training programme. ([Barli Development Institute for Rural Women 2022](#); [McGilligan 2012](#)).

## 2.3. Discourse

In 1946, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was established by ECOSOC resolution 11(II) of 21 June 1946 ([CSW 1946](#)). This functional commission of ECOSOC, created to promote women's rights, now also oversees the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the leading document agreed by governments at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, September 1995 ([United Nations 1995](#)) and provides a gender perspective across the UN. A large number of the statements of the BIC regarding women and girls have been presented at the annual meetings of the CSW.

The first statement regarding women made by BIC to the CSW was in August 1947, 'A Bahá'í Statement on the Rights of Women', which set out some of the religion's teachings on the equality of women and men, including:

- \* 'Sex equality is a basic Bahá'í principle'
- \* 'The present imbalance in society, which results from the dominance of man over woman, is a dangerous phenomenon and may be considered as one cause of war.'
- \* 'Sex equality connotes an organic change in the social structure.'
- \* 'The Bahá'í teachings advocate for women an education equal to that received by men, since woman is the first educator of the child; and opportunity to pursue any career for which they are qualified, with special emphasis on their role as keepers of the peace' ([BIC 1947b](#)).

The statement draws on the Bahá'í texts and statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and links equality with other themes considered here, such as the education of the girl child. Recalling that the Second World War had ended only two years earlier on 2 September 1945, the statement about role of women in peacekeeping was not perhaps very unusual, but identifying male dominance of women as a cause of war seems prescient. The link between the two does not appear to be widely recognized. This same point was echoed by the Universal House of Justice in its 1985 statement on peace:

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 ([Universal House of Justice 1985](#)).

Another unusual concept in the BIC statement is 'Sex equality connotes an organic change in the social structure'. The scriptural basis for this may be these verses of Bahá'u'lláh, which echo the Hebrew Bible (Yeshayahu/Isaiah 2:4; Michah/Micah 4:3):

We cherish the hope that through the earnest endeavours of such as are the exponents of the power of God—exalted be His glory—the weapons of war throughout the world may be converted into instruments of reconstruction and that strife and conflict may be removed from the midst of men ([Bahá'u'lláh 1978](#), p. 23).

Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead ([Bahá'u'lláh 1983](#), p. 7).

Shoghi Effendi, the head of the Bahá'í Faith at the time, wrote on 28 November 1931:

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve . . . does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal . . . It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced ([Shoghi Effendi 1991](#), pp. 42–3).

The BIC statement aligns with the preamble to the UN Charter, which came into force on 24 October 1945, which 'determined' 'to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women' ([United Nations 1945](#)), and predates the adoption by the UN General Assembly of Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948 ([United Nations 1948b](#)).

Subsequent statements of the BIC have made similar statements linking equality to peace but also to a host of other themes. For example, in 2006, the BIC responded to the 2006 Commission on Social Development's review of the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, acknowledging the advances made in the context of the Millennium Development Goals, but also noting:

Despite these advances . . . the underlying materialistic assumptions driving poverty eradication efforts remain virtually unchallenged: it is generally accepted that an increase in material resources will eradicate this condition from human life. . . . Yet the most persistent ills obstructing the peaceful development of peoples and nations—the marginalization of girls and women, failing states, the lack of political freedoms, the spread of HIV/AIDS, the proliferation of weapons and violent conflict, inter-ethnic and racial tensions, religious intolerance and extremism, lawlessness and growing unemployment—cannot be alleviated by material means alone. These social ills evidence a different kind of poverty—one rooted in the values and attitudes that shape relationships between individuals, communities, and nations as well as between the governors and the governed.

The BIC suggested ways forward, including establishing gender equality, for example, expanding development indicators to assess ethical and moral capacities as well as Gross National Product and the Human Development Index, on the grounds that ‘progress of communities and nations requires not only material inputs and legal measures to secure order, but the development of moral capabilities to govern behaviour and decision-making by individuals and institutions’ and proposed ‘a set of principles as a basis for the construction of ethically-based development indicators’, including gender equality, trustworthiness and freedom of thought, conscience and belief (BIC 2006a).

As a mechanism for influencing the discourse on social development, such a statement may not appear to be very useful. However, it is interesting to note that in the framing of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (called Agenda 2030), gender equality is not only an independent goal (no. 5) but made its way into most of the other 16 goals, either directly or by implication (i.e., by the use of ‘all’ or ‘universal’).

In 2007, the BIC made a similar intervention of principle in its comments on the UN’s draft of ‘Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights’. It suggested the inclusion of a new guiding principle, the equality of men and women:

While guiding principle ‘A. Participation by the poor’, includes a section regarding women in poverty, the persistently disproportionate number of women among the world’s poor, including elderly women, the systemic violation of girls’ and women’s rights, and the gross under-representation of women in governance at all levels, merits the creation of a separate principle termed, ‘equality of men and women’, to guide all poverty alleviation efforts. The aim of this principle is not only to call attention to the dire condition of women but also to remind states that the full and confident participation of women in legal, political, economic, academic, social and artistic arenas is a prerequisite for a more just and peaceful development pathway. Their participation, in turn, opens up opportunities for men and boys to excel as fathers, husbands, workers, community members and leaders in ways that do not exist today (BIC 2007).

The resulting document ‘Final draft of the guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights, submitted by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona’, 18 July 2012 (United Nations 2012a) was adopted by the Human Rights Council on 27 September 2012 by consensus, in resolution 21/11 and on 20 December 2012, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on human rights and extreme poverty (A/RES/67/164, para. 17) in which it ‘Takes note with appreciation of the guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights, adopted by the Human Rights Council in its resolution 21/11 as a useful tool for States in the formulation and implementation of poverty reduction and eradication policies, as appropriate’ (United Nations 2012b). The adoption was the culmination of a consultative process over many years that included States Parties, UN agencies, treaty bodies, other intergovernmental organizations, national human rights institutions, and non-governmental organizations, such as the BIC. Perhaps unexpectedly, the final document included the new principle ‘Equality between men and women’ as the third of the ‘Foundational principles’ (United Nations 2012c).

The BIC submission to the Commission on the Status of Women in 2020, ‘Developing New Dynamics of Power to Transform the Structures of Society’ (BIC 2020), took the opportunity of the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action ‘to analyse social structures and power dynamics that are hindering the full expression of gender equality’, noting that the implementation of equality ‘in all facets of life is far from realized’ and that ‘a number of recent setbacks around the world with respect to securing previous gains demonstrate the vulnerability of efforts that employ the adversarial methods of the very structures that impede the advancement of women’. It called for a ‘deep examination of the current ordering of society’ to ‘identify obstacles hindering equality and opportunities for its flourishing’ and a ‘restructuring society based on ideals of oneness, unity and justice’. It also reviewed the efforts towards advancing gender equality at the



United Nations since the 1995 world conference on women, remarking that the dialogue ‘has centered largely on expanding access to power within current, imbalanced structures’, a process that ‘has failed to fully address inequalities that have been perpetuated and reinforced across generations’. The obstacle was identified as the reluctance of ‘those who are most favoured by the current ordering of society’ to effect the ‘total transformation of a system they perceive to be of value’.

Using concepts identified in its first statement to CSW in 1947, the BIC described how the ‘dynamics of domination and opposition have come to define many human relationships, including those between women and men’.

Efforts to achieve gender equality are frequently framed as battles for power. In its contentious expression, power generates inequality, violence, and exploitation, and cannot easily be oriented to the common or interpersonal good. In a system that is set up like a zero-sum game, it may make sense to fight for access to limited resources and for positions of privilege. Yet, is a zero-sum paradigm the pinnacle of social organization?

Its recommended approaches similarly echoed earlier documents: ‘tapping into the powers of the human spirit and of the collective’, investing in ‘educational processes that give attention to developing both the intellectual and spiritual powers of human beings’ and that ‘promote the oneness of humanity and the equality of women and men’. It advocated seeking ‘moral solutions’ and spiritual sources of power to address ‘crises of corruption, greed and oppression’ and to transform society to one focused on the ‘betterment of humanity as a whole’.

There are many more examples of the contributions the BIC has made to the discourse on gender equality (BIC 2023c). Over a 75-year period, the BIC has remained true to its original advocacy of the equality of women and men but has become more sophisticated, and more nuanced, in its discourse, drawing not only on statements of principle found in the Bahá’í texts but also on experience from the grassroots through to the international arena to inform its argument. It appears to have been somewhat successful in influencing the international discourse, accepting that the universal application of the concepts has lagged behind the rhetoric at the UN.

### 3. Theme B: Education of the Girl Child

#### 3.1. Bahá’í Texts

Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing and in all that hath been laid down in the Holy Tablet (Bahá’u’lláh 1992, para. 48).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in His Tablets, not only calls attention to the responsibility of parents to educate all their children, but He also clearly specifies that the ‘training and culture of daughters is more necessary than that of sons’, for girls will one day be mothers, and mothers are the first educators of the new generation. If it is not possible, therefore, for a family to educate all the children, preference is to be accorded to daughters since, through educated mothers, the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society (quoted in Bahá’u’lláh 1992, n76).

Daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, no. 62.7).

She must become proficient in the arts and sciences and prove by her accomplishments that her abilities and powers have merely been latent . . . Woman must especially devote her energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences, seeking to assist mankind in that which is most needful (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, no. 95.11).

### 3.2. Praxis

#### 3.2.1. Education of Girls in Iran

Efforts to put the Bahá'í concepts regarding the equality of women and men and the advancement of women into practice began early in the lifetime of the religion. An early step was the education of girls as prescribed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. It appears that Bahá'ís make significant provision for the education of women and girls, and do not see women merely as victims or oppressed, needing the assistance of men. They are rather seen as active agents of change in their communities, promoters of the advancement of women, protagonists of education for women and girls, and engaged participants and leaders of Bahá'í communities and society, and as equal providers of information, skills, and leadership. This approach is likely based on the letters ('Tablets') sent by both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá to their followers. Momen notes:

The Bahá'í World Centre has recorded some 20,000 items as works of Bahá'u'lláh and 30,000 as works of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the vast majority being letters to their followers in Iran. The Bahá'í leaders encouraged their followers to be less parochial and more global in their outlook, to seek education and to raise the position of women in their communities (M. Momen 2015, p. xxiii).

Examples of the implementation of this are seen across Iran in the founding of schools for girls. At first these were similar to the basic traditional primary schools (*maktábs*) common in Iran, where children would be taught elementary literacy and poetry, and would receive religious training.

As the Bahá'í Faith spread in Iran following the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh of his mission in 1863, communities of Bahá'ís began to develop in cities, towns, and villages across the country (see M. Momen 2015, 2021). Shavar (2009, p. 5) puts the number of Bahá'ís at the end of the 19th century as around 100,000. These were loosely organized at first but starting around 1879 in Tehran (M. Momen 2015, pp. 24, 89–91) they gradually tried to implement the provisions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws, including the establishment of consultative councils in every city (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, para. 30). The council in Tehran was more formally established in 1897 as the Central Assembly of Tehran, a precursor of both the Local Spiritual Assembly of Tehran and the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran (M. Momen 2015, p. 92). Many such local assemblies were established in Iran in the early years of the 20th century and among the actions many took was the establishment of schools, initially for boys and later for girls. Shavar argues that so pervasive was the Bahá'í emphasis on 'kindness, education and science, just rule and protection of subjects from oppression and injustice, political quietism, loyalty to the state' that the Bahá'í Faith 'became a source of religious, moral and social modernism in Qajar Iran' (Shavar 2009, p. 5). Thus the discourse was on modernization and, necessarily, education, including the education of girls. The Bahá'ís published their own analysis in 1928, looking back over the preceding quarter of a century or so:

It is the Persian Bahá'ís who have most ardently sought out and developed the advantages of modern education, including instruction in technical subjects; it is the Persian Bahá'ís who have psychologically overcome the traditional discrimination against women; and it is the Persian Bahá'ís finally, who, of all citizens, have cultivated the simple virtues of honesty, good-will and co-operation which are the vital elements in any democracy worthy the name (Holley 1928, p. 37).

Though possibly somewhat exaggerated, as it fails to take account of the Iranian reformist movement towards the modernization of schools from the early 1850s, including the 'controversial' question of the education of women (Shavar 2009, pp. 12–14), this narrative highlights the nature of the discourse on women and education in which the Bahá'ís participated, if not originated. The establishment of schools for girls was a significant aspect of the application of Bahá'í concepts to social life.

All Bahá'í schools in Iran were closed in 1934 on the orders of the government when the Bahá'ís refused to keep the schools open on Bahá'í holy days, as opening on holy days

is in contravention of Bahá'í law (Shoghi Effendi 1995, pp. 362–3; Shoghi Effendi 1970, pp. 51–2).

### 3.2.2. Education of Girls in the 21st Century

There are numerous examples of the Bahá'í effort to extend education to girls, particularly where access to education is limited, where cultural norms discourage girls going to school or continuing their education beyond puberty, and where families are unable or reluctant to pay for girls' education.

Remy Desai-Patel, blogging for the [Borgen Project](#) (2022), which fights extreme poverty, describes how the high rate of poverty affects school attendance in Central African Republic and describes various organizations that are working to improve the situation, including the Youth Education Pack, funded by Education Cannot Wait, and the Bahá'í community:

After-school programs could be of great use and benefit as well, allowing children to have a safe space away from their home lives. Baha'i communities are an incredible example, where they have found multiple ways to prioritize and bring education to children who need it. There is a definitive aspiration by many to boost education in the Central African Republic and more success stories such as the one in Baha'i are inevitable (Desai-Patel 2020).

The BIC described the informal educational work being undertaken by women in Central African Republic, describing how women in rural villages have established informal classes for the moral and spiritual education of young people in their neighbourhoods and mentor others to become teachers. Over time community members gather to consult about their aspirations for the local young people and together establish a community-supported school (BIC 2018b).

In Uganda, a Bahá'í youth group convened a series of community discussions on the importance of educating the girl child and afterwards the village sent its first young woman to college (BIC 2018b).

The *Vanuatu Daily Post*'s article 'Teoumaville Peace Conference: Education of Girls as a Road to Peace' of 3 July 2018, highlighted the importance of girls' education, the challenges that the country faced in achieving this and how this could be addressed. The conference organizers were inspired by the Bahá'í quote: '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.' The conference opened with brief statements on peace, human rights and the education of girls, made by community leaders and voluntary organizations, including Peace Corps, Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition, Vanuatu Young Women for Change, and the Bahá'ís (Vanuatu Daily Post 2018).

The BIC document *For the Betterment of the World: The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development* (BIC 2018a) features a number of Bahá'í educational programmes focused on girls, such as one in Battambang, Cambodia, where usually only boys are offered formal education. The Bahá'ís' community-building efforts increased the 'consciousness of the equality of women and men' such that more girls were able 'to receive higher levels of education', such that one girl became the first girl in her village to attend high school. She in turn helped many younger girls 'to advance in their own education' and was later asked by the Bahá'ís to train youth in other villages. Because people now have a better understanding the importance of the education of girls, 'it is common practice for girls in her village to receive formal education' (BIC 2018a, p. 14).

### 3.3. Discourse

The UN Commission on the Status of Women introduced the theme of the education of girls in its second session (1948) and this has been a staple of its work agenda since. The Bahá'í International Community seems to have begun its particular focus on girls soon after its accreditation to ECOSOC. In its statement to the UN on 14 January 1974, it posited that prioritizing girls' education ahead of boys is important for developing the wider community:

To place greater emphasis on the importance of the contribution of women as mothers and as educators of children . . . parents are urged to give preference to the education of girls if both boys and girls in the family cannot be given equal opportunity for education.

It is not the Bahá'í view, however, that women are to be considered important only in relationship to the rearing of children and attending to the duties of the household. The importance placed on the education of women in the Bahá'í Faith is intended to bring about the equality of men and women (BIC 1974a).

The Bahá'í International Community has contributed numerous statements on this theme (e.g., BIC 1975) to the CSW and other UN agencies, often with further elaboration and details of how the basic principle is operationalized. The application of this principle by Bahá'ís at the grassroots has provided experience that the community draws on to go beyond the simple articulation of the idea but has also informed its evolving discourse.

The Bahá'í contribution to the discourse has also developed as the implications of what educated women offer to the ever-advancing civilization has become more apparent: a wider and deeper range of skills, concepts, and attitudes that girls need to acquire to become active agents of the development of their communities and families. Basic literacy skills are still required but a much more complex and sophisticated set of skills, knowledge acquisition and creation, and conceptual thinking are now necessary, not just for the advancement of individual women into the work force but as critical players and decision-makers in governance, legislation, business, environmental protection, social and economic development, and in creating new forms of education itself. A few examples suffice:

‘Seizing the Opportunity: Redefining the challenge of climate change’ (BIC 2008):

A fundamental component of resolving the climate change challenge will be the cultivation of values, attitudes and skills that give rise to just and sustainable patterns of human interaction with the environment . . . In practical terms, this means that girls and boys must be afforded access to the same curricula, with priority given to the girl child who will one day assume the role of educating future generations. The curriculum itself must seek to develop in children the capacity to think in terms of systems, processes and relationships rather than in terms of isolated disciplines. Indeed, the problem of climate change has powerfully demonstrated the need for integrated and systemic approaches. Students must also be given the concrete skills to translate their awareness into action. This can be accomplished, in part, through incorporating an element of public service into curricula, thereby helping students to develop the ability to initiate projects, to inspire action, to engage in collective decision-making and to cultivate their sense of dignity and self-worth. Overall, the curriculum should strive to integrate theoretical and practical considerations as well as to link notions of individual progress with service to the broader community.

‘Youth and Adolescents Education in Service of Community’ (BIC 2012):

In order for youth to play their important role, the inequities of girls’ access to quality education must be addressed. As has been repeatedly affirmed, the education of girls has a ‘multiplier effect’—it results in reduced chances of early marriage, greater likelihood of girls’ informed and active role in family planning, reduced infant and maternal mortality, enhanced participation of girls in social, economic and political decision-making, and the promotion of economic prosperity. This is particularly urgent in parts of the world where adolescent girls are married and begin to bear children. The need to extend educational opportunities to girls rests on the understanding that the equality of men and women, boys and girls is a fundamental truth about human reality and not just a desirable condition to be achieved for the good of society. Their full participation in the arenas of law, politics, science and technology, commerce, and religion, to name but a few, are

needed to forge a social order enlightened by the contributions and wisdom of fully half of the world's population . . . Governments, then, must follow through on their commitments to prohibit the unjust practices of infanticide, prenatal sex selection, female genital mutilation, trafficking of girl children and use of girls in prostitution and pornography, and to enforce laws to ensure that marriage is entered into only with the free and full consent of both spouses. The overarching objective must be to address the root causes of gender bias so that all people can play their rightful role in the transformation of society.

'Women's Health and Human Rights' (BIC 2011):

Ultimately, it is imperative to address women's rights in a manner that recognizes the woman's full role in society and fosters her sense of self-worth as well as the intrinsic nobility of every woman, man and child . . . without a comprehensive approach to women's rights, their efforts may prove ineffective or unsustainable. A literate woman is more likely to make better health decisions. It has been shown that one to three years of a mothers' schooling can decrease children's mortality rate by 15 percent. An economically sustained woman will have a greater ability to avoid sex trafficking and slavery. Women in good health have the opportunity to pursue educational and economic opportunities and to contribute more fully to the betterment of society.

Boys born into such environments are also the beneficiaries. With educated and healthy mothers comes a reduced risk of involvement in sexual crimes and other offenses as youth and adults. As women are the first educators of their children, young boys will be more likely to reap the benefits of literacy, economic opportunity, and good health as well. This cycle will be reinforcing, resulting in a tipping point at which the society will no longer tolerate the oppression of its girls and women.

#### 4. Theme C: Leadership and Participation

##### 4.1. Bahá'í Texts

They [women] will enter all the administrative branches of politics. They will attain in all such a degree as will be considered the very highest station of the world of humanity and will take part in all affairs . . . At the time of elections the right to vote is the inalienable right of women, and the entrance of women into all human departments is an irrefutable and incontrovertible question. No soul can retard or prevent it ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1967, pp. 182–3).

The woman has greater moral courage than the man; she has also special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger and crisis ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1987, p. 103).

. . . both women and men are eligible for election to Secondary and Local Houses of Justice (currently designated as National and Local Spiritual Assemblies; Bahá'u'lláh 1992, n80).

##### 4.2. Praxis

###### 4.2.1. Women's Participation in Bahá'í Elections and Membership of Bahá'í Institutions

One of the measures of women's advancement and equality is the participation of women in political processes and leadership (see e.g., World Economic Forum 2022, 'Global Gender Gap Report'). Tracking the number of national leaders who are women is common (e.g., Statista 2022a), including in popular media (e.g., Time 2022a), and the discourse around it in recent years has included the perception that many of them are much better leaders than are men (e.g., Pew Research Center 2018; and Mayer and May 2021). According to UN Women, 30 women were serving as Heads of State and/or Government in 28 countries as of 19 September 2022 (UN Women 2022a; World Population Review 2022; shortly after these statistics were published the woman who was British prime minister



resigned, the shortest serving PM ever). To put these numbers in context, there are 193 member States of the United Nations ([United Nations 2022a](#)).

A word about the Bahá'í system of administration and governance: There is no clergy or clerical structure within the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í administrative order provides the framework for governance at all levels—local, regional, national, and international—and comprises two 'arms', elected and appointed (for details from a Bahá'í perspective, see [Bahá'í Faith 2022b](#); and [Mitchell 2009](#)). For the purposes of this article, I have looked at two dimensions of women's participation in the system: the ability of women to vote and to be elected to office, and the frequency of their election to local and national Bahá'í institutions.

#### 4.2.2. Women and the Establishment of Bahá'í Institutions

It was not until the late 19th century that there were sufficient numbers of Bahá'ís living in one area to merit the formation of local Bahá'í institutions, and then only in Iran. Another factor in the evolution of these institutions may have been the very concept of ordinary people, non-clerics, electing a religious body that had responsibility over others, as this was outside the experience of most people, particularly Middle Eastern women. In North America, businesses had boards and the earliest efforts to establish Bahá'í institutions there reflected both processes and structures from that sector as well as from the political realm. The Bahá'í system described above emerged over time, the earliest form being an appointed body of men established in Tehran in 1899, until 'Abdu'l-Bahá initiated the process in the early 1900s. In Iran and in the Middle East in general, women were excluded from participation until the 1950s, possibly on grounds of cultural norms, the breaking of which would have drawn further fire on an already persecuted religion.

Institutions emerged in North America and Europe as the number of Bahá'ís increased across each country and as larger numbers of Bahá'ís lived in the same geographic area, thereby increasing the number of communities where the election of the local spiritual assembly was feasible.

#### United States

In the early days of the Bahá'í Faith in the West, there were a number of issues with which the Bahá'ís grappled. One was the question of whether to organize the movement at all. The debate about this issue has been well rehearsed elsewhere (see, for example, [Hollinger 1992](#), Introduction). In North America particularly there was a question about the role of women in the administration of the Bahá'í community, should it ever be organized. Because women made up such a large number of the early believers, they seem to have been influential in the discussions about these issues.

However, women were largely excluded from most of the earliest attempts at organization. For example, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, a seven-member all-male Board of Counsel was formed in 1899 or 1900 ([Dahl 1992](#), p. 10; [Shoghi Effendi 1995](#), p. 260; [Stockman 1985](#), p. 112). When this lapsed circa 1902, the Bahá'ís made more informal arrangements for their administration, which included women. But when the Board was temporarily reconstituted in 1904, women were again excluded.<sup>3</sup>

Stockman notes that by the end of January 1898 the number of Bahá'ís in Chicago was over 155, the largest and most active of the Bahá'í communities of the time. The Chicago community re-organized itself in March 1900 and selected a ten-member Board of Council ([Stockman 1985](#), pp. xxix, 93, 170). The next year, 15 May 1901, the Chicago Bahá'ís elected a nine-man Board of Council for a term of five years and on 24 May 1901 changed its name from the Chicago Board of Council to the House of Justice. Shortly afterward, on 29 May 1901, the Bahá'í women, led by Corinne True and Ella Nash, elected the 'Women's Auxiliary Board', which controlled the finances of the Chicago community. On 10 May 1902, at the request of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Chicago House of Justice changed its name to House of Spirituality but did not change its all-male composition. It was incorporated in 1907, the first Bahá'í community to acquire legal status. The Women's Auxiliary Board was

renamed the ‘Assembly of Teaching’ after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed a letter to it with this designation (Stockman 1995, pp. xv, xxv, 44–50, 54, 278).

Several years later, in line with the emerging suffrage movement in the West, Corinne True forced the issue by writing to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá about whether women could serve on Bahá’í institutions. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s replied in July 1909:

In the law of God, men and women are equal in all rights *save* in the Universal House of Justice, for the Chairman and members of the House of Justice are men according to the Text of the Book. Aside from this, in all the rest of the Associations, like the Convention for building the Mashreq’Ul-Azkar, the Assembly of Teaching, the Spiritual Assembly, Philanthropic Association, Scientific Associations, men and women are co-partners in all the rights (Stockman 1995, p. 501 n606).<sup>4</sup>

Stockman notes that True shared the contents of this Tablet with the Chicago House of Spirituality but that it did not immediately act to include women, as the ‘House of Spirituality was not sure whether it was a Spiritual Assembly. Indeed, it was not clear what the Universal House of Justice was’ (Stockman 1995, p. 323). Chicago eventually concluded that while the boards were initially to be all-male, they should now include women, as time had moved on.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s correspondence with Corinne True was a clear signal that women could, and would, be members of decision-making bodies within the religion. True received more than 50 letters (‘Tablets’) from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Whitmore 1984, p. 21), some about the position of women in the religion and calling her to action in its promotion. As a result she created and was the first president of the Women’s Assembly of Teaching, a parallel organization to the House of Spirituality. On 19 June 1908, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá responded positively to her suggestion that an organization be created to oversee the establishment of the first Bahá’í House of Worship in the West, to be located in the Chicago area. In his letter he affirmed, ‘In this new meeting, especially for the establishment of the Temple, ladies are also to be members’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1909, p. 100).

The national organization that resulted was the Bahai Temple Unity, the constitution of which did not mention that women could be members, but neither did it exclude them. Of the 39 delegates elected to represent their states at the convention establishing the organization, 16 were women, including Corinne True. The organization was created and its nine members—six men and three women—elected on 23 March 1909, including Anna Parmerton as vice-president and Corinne True as financial secretary (Whitmore 1984, pp. 260–1, 52).

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was visiting the United States in 1912, he advised the Chicago House of Spirituality to reform as a ‘Spiritual Meeting’, onto which both women and men could be elected, and this was effected on 11 August 1912.

Ten years later, in 1922, at a time when American women had only recently obtained the right to vote in political elections, Shoghi Effendi sent a message to the North American Bahá’ís to transform the ‘Executive Board’ into a legislative institution (Rabbání 1969, p. 56). On 25 April 1922, a ‘National Spiritual Assembly’ was elected to replace the Executive Board of the Bahá’í Temple Unity. The election procedure followed the one common in political elections in the United States: candidates were nominated, with a straw poll taken to trim the number of eligible candidates, and electioneering. It appears that the difference between the new body and its forerunner was little more than a change in name (Rutstein 1987, p. 160; Whitmore 1984, p. 122) and Shoghi Effendi did not recognize it as having been properly formed. It took three more years for the transformation to take place. Shoghi Effendi wrote to ‘the esteemed members of the American National Spiritual Assembly’ on 29 January 1925 setting out the way the forthcoming national convention should be conducted and also the qualities of the members of a National Spiritual Assembly (Shoghi Effendi 1925). Following the election in April 1925, at which two women were elected (Baha’i News Letter 1925, p. 2), Shoghi Effendi recognized the American national body as

the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada (Shoghi Effendi 1995, p. 333) in a cable received on 25 July:

Heartily endorse Convention's choice. May America's National representatives fulfill our fondest expectations . . . Shoghi (Shoghi Effendi, in *Bahá'í News Letter* 1925, p. 7).

#### British Isles

In Britain, organization came later. The Bahá'í community was smaller and less well developed than that in North America. Phillip Smith suggests that in Britain the Bahá'í Faith began not as a religion but as a 'loose inclusive movement' (Phillip Smith 1992, p. 153), the adherents seeing the movement as a 'widening of the basis of (their) faith' (Rosenberg 1911a, p. 21).

As a result of this thinking, organization of the Bahá'í community of the British Isles was less well advanced than in North America in the first two decades of the 20th century. By the time the British Bahá'ís got around to organizing themselves formally, many of the battles about whether women were to serve in administrative capacities had already been fought and won in North America. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, to see that British Bahá'í women participated more or less equally with men on Britain's first Bahá'í institutions, which came into being more than decade after those in North America.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, while in Paris<sup>5</sup> in November 1911, discussed with Ethel Rosenberg the necessity of setting up a committee in London that would have 'absolute power to decide what is to be done' regarding the collection of moneys and Bahá'í publications (Rosenberg 1911b). 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggested a membership of six women and one man (Weinberg 1995, p. 142). This may point to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wish to demonstrate the principle of the equality of women and men which he began to espouse most vigorously while in Paris and on his subsequent journey across North America. On the other hand, it may simply reflect the number of active and committed Bahá'ís in Britain at the time. In any case, this committee was never convened. Instead, shortly after the outbreak of World War I, on 16 November 1914, a 'Consultation Committee' was convened with eight members: six women and two men. (Weinberg 1995, pp. 155–6). This committee was not long-lived, however, possibly as a result of the rigours of the war. Dr Esslemont, a Bahá'í from Bournemouth who was on pilgrimage in 1919, was told by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that it should be re-established. After a preliminary meeting in October 1920, the re-grouped Council met for the first time in December 1920, with a membership of nine women and three men. The membership of this Council also was rather flexible, with members leaving to go abroad and replacement members being appointed by the Council itself. It appears that this committee was largely self-appointed, although it had the authority of 'Abdu'l-Bahá for its formation (Weinberg 1995, pp. 174–5).

In November 1921, Ethel Rosenberg returned to the Holy Land on pilgrimage to discover that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had just passed away and had appointed his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to be the head of the religion, the Guardian. He emphasized to Rosenberg the need to elect a spiritual assembly in London (Weinberg 1995, p. 211). This was part of a wider plan to establish local spiritual assemblies throughout the Bahá'í world, as outlined by Shoghi Effendi in his letter to his 'fellow-workers in the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh' of 5 March 1922. He called for the establishment of local assemblies wherever nine or more believers lived, directing that all activities be placed under the authority of the local and national assemblies (Shoghi Effendi 1968, pp. 17–25). Shortly after, in April, he sent verbal messages to Germany through Consul Schwarz and to Britain through Ethel Rosenberg to form local spiritual assemblies and to arrange for the election of a national spiritual assembly in each country (Weinberg 1995, pp. 211–12; Rabbání 1969, p. 56).<sup>6</sup>

In Britain in late May 1922, the Bahá'í communities of London, Manchester, and Bournemouth collectively elected the Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly for England, also known as the Spiritual Assembly for London and the All-England Bahá'í Council (Weinberg 1995, p. 213). It met for the first time on June 17 of that year and was composed of seven women

and three men, plus two men representing communities outside London. In April 1923, this Council was disbanded and elections held for a London Spiritual Assembly. Ballots were sent to 77 people, 58 women (75%) and 19 men (25%) living in London and southern England who identified themselves with the Bahá'í religion. The resulting body consisted of three men and six women.

On 12 March 1923, Shoghi Effendi wrote to Bahá'ís in America, Great Britain, Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy, Japan, and Australasia about Bahá'í administration, outlining the process for the annual election of assemblies and calling for the establishment of local and national funds (Shoghi Effendi 1968, pp. 34–43; Rabbání 1969, p. 330). The British Assembly was concerned that an annual election would hinder the Bahá'í work, especially if new members were elected each time. Shoghi Effendi replied to their concerns, saying they should dissolve the current Assembly and hold an election for the new one, with exactly nine members. They immediately arranged for the election of the London Spiritual Assembly by postal ballot, the results of which included six women, four of whom had the highest number of votes (Weinberg 1995, pp. 223–4, 226). This body arranged a postal ballot for the National Spiritual Assembly, and five men and four women were elected, meeting for the first time on 13 October 1923. Mrs Thornburgh Cropper was elected treasurer and Ethel Rosenberg the secretary. This pattern of slightly more men than women serving on the national body was to continue until World War Two, when the numbers were reversed between 1943 and 1947, possibly a result of the recruitment of men into the war effort.

From these two early examples of women's participation on elected institutional bodies, it can be seen how instrumental women were in driving the creation of new institutions and in ensuring that women not only voted for their members but took on the responsibilities of membership themselves. As the Bahá'ís grew in number and the spread of the religion widened across the globe, women continued to feature significantly in this arena. It seems that in this period, when women in the West were struggling to obtain the vote, Bahá'í women were looking beyond the vote itself to being members of elected bodies of the religion. When the administrative institutions of the religion were first established, most women did not serve in governing roles in any sector. It was only in August 1920 that all women in the United States were granted the right to vote, while in the United Kingdom all women received the franchise in 1928, both well after the Bahá'ís had already established their elected administrative institutions at local, and even national, levels.

#### Other Countries

Two other National Spiritual Assemblies were elected at the same time as the British one, Germany (Austria was added to this assembly in 1934), and India and Burma (Pakistan was added in 1948). The National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt and Sudan was formed in 1924. In the 1930s, there were four women and five men on the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria. The first woman was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma in 1936 (Shirin Fozdar). In common with other countries with a majority Muslim population, the National Spiritual Assembly of Egypt and Sudan had no women members. When in 1951 Bahá'í women in Egypt were extended the right of membership on local spiritual assemblies, Shoghi Effendi called it 'a notable step in the progress of Bahá'í women of the Middle East' (Shoghi Effendi 1971, p. 12). They were given the right to serve on the national assembly and to participate in the national convention in April 1956 (Shoghi Effendi 1971, pp. 96–7).

Iranian Bahá'í women were extended the right to serve on both local and national institutions in April 1954, Shoghi Effendi stating that the step removed the 'last remaining obstacle to the enjoyment of complete equality of rights in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Persian Bahá'í Community' (Shoghi Effendi 1971, p. 65; Bahá'í World 1956).

This decision of Shoghi Effendi coincided with a period in Iran that saw more women taking part in political activism and when the status of women was part of public discourse in the country. Iranian women were given the right to vote and stand for parliament in 1963, a result of the White Revolution, a package of reforms that also saw the age of marriage for

girls raised from 9 to 15 (Tohidi 2016, pp. 75–89). The rapidity of the changes to the status of women in the White Revolution was a product of the modernization programme of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, which was itself an extension of the process begun by his father in the 1930s. Traditionalists saw these changes as pandering to American/Western secular interests and influence and were declared ‘immoral’ by religious leaders. Thus while Bahá’í women were applauded by their co-religionists for their participation in the electoral process and their complete equality with Bahá’í men in this arena of service, the perception of women by the wider population was not altered, despite the overwhelming popular vote in a referendum that secured the changes but which likely embedded the idea of the ‘emancipation of women as immoral and dangerous’ (Vogel 2018; see also Keddie 2006). The Islamic Revolution in 1979 retained the right of women to vote but reduced the legal age of marriage for girls to 9.<sup>7</sup>

The number of National Spiritual Assemblies increased by only three between 1926 and 1947, when the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria, disbanded during the Nazi regime, was reformed. One was the National Spiritual Assembly of Iraq, formed in 1931, with no women members. The National Spiritual Assembly of Iran formed in 1934, with no women members until Bahá’í women in Iran were accorded full rights in 1954 and Adelaide Sharp, an American Bahá’í who had moved to Iran in 1929 to assist with the education of girls, was duly elected to the National Assembly in that year (Shoghi Effendi 1971, p. 65). Today there are over 170 National Spiritual Assemblies.

#### 4.2.3. Membership of Women on National Spiritual Assemblies

We now turn to women participating in the election of Bahá’í institutions and being elected to them.

In Western political elections, if one wished to increase the number of women elected to public office, the main way to achieve this would be to increase the number of women candidates by different strategies, for example by nominating or selecting only women candidates, restricting the number of male candidates, or having a 50/50 slate. This is not possible for Bahá’ís.

The participation of Bahá’ís in partisan politics is forbidden and they may not join or support political parties. They may vote in elections if they do not have to be a party member to do so (see an explanation for this in Universal House of Justice 2013). Similarly, election to their own governing councils must be free from partisanship, and is seen as a service, mostly volunteer and unremunerated. It is considered inappropriate to seek election. Bahá’í concepts of leadership, power, and authority are very different from current political concepts. Bahá’ís have no individual leaders but elect governing councils.

The process of election to Bahá’í institutions is also unusual compared to what is generally considered to be the democratic process, in which political parties nominate candidates for office, a campaign is launched, votes are canvassed and voters select from among the nominated candidates the ones for whom they will vote. The Bahá’í process has none of these elements. As there are no parties within the Bahá’í system, there is no manifesto, and no way to elicit the opinion of an individual on a topic dear to the heart of a voter, there is no ideological party platform around which people cluster and for which they seek support, nor is there a pathway to election, such as might be found in a party system. No one stands for office and no one campaigns. The governing councils elect their own officers, so no one stands for chair, secretary, or other position. Election is not considered a measure of the ‘popularity’ of an individual. The concept of leadership as often promoted in politics requires personal characteristics that are not the ones Bahá’ís are encouraged to seek in those to be elected. The method of voting in every election requires Bahá’ís write on their ballot (or record on a voting app) the names of the individuals they consider possess a number of spiritual qualities.

Shoghi Effendi advised electors

... to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the



necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.

Those with the most votes, on the basis of plurality, are elected.

All members of the local Bahá'í community aged 18 and over are able to vote (the age was lowered from 21 in 2021; [Universal House of Justice 2021a](#)) and all those over the age of 21 are eligible for election. National Spiritual Assemblies (and, recently, some local spiritual assemblies of large Bahá'í communities) are elected by a two-stage process, whereby voters living in a designated geographic area (an electoral unit, not unlike a political electoral ward) vote at their 'unit convention' for a number of delegates who will vote at the 'national convention' for the National Spiritual Assembly. All the Bahá'ís of the country aged 21 and over are eligible for election to the National Spiritual Assembly, not just the delegates.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to think of their administrative institutions not as political bodies but rather as channels through which guidance and love flows to people in their communities. In this perspective, election to a Bahá'í administrative institution 'is regarded as a summons to service and not as an accession to power' ([Universal House of Justice 2000b](#)), and the authority is embedded within the institution itself, not in the individuals who compose it.

It appears that in the early years of the religion's development of its administrative institutions there was some difficulty around these concepts and thus quite a lot of guidance was provided by Shoghi Effendi, for example:

I feel that reference to personalities before the election would give rise to misunderstanding and differences. What the friends should do is to get thoroughly acquainted with one another, to exchange views, to mix freely and discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications for such a membership without reference or application, however indirect, to particular individuals. We should refrain from influencing the opinion of others, of canvassing for any particular individual, but should stress the necessity of getting fully acquainted with the qualifications of membership referred to in our Beloved's Tablets and of learning more about one another through direct, personal experience rather than through the reports and opinions of our friends ([Shoghi Effendi 1927](#)).

The reality, then, for voters is that they are completely free to vote for anyone they choose and who in their estimation has the combination of at least some of the requisite qualities. Women as well as men vote for these Bahá'í institutions and we may consider what this suggests, if anything, about the way the religion thinks about the nature, qualities, and roles of women and men.

It is in this light that we turn to statistics.

The tables below show the numbers of men and women serving on national (or nationally functioning) institutions in the British Isles and North America from their establishment. These two bodies have been chosen because of their early development, their long history and continuity, and the accessibility of information. Both were established at a time when the franchise and other political rights of women were being debated and were not yet fully realized. A more comprehensive study of National Spiritual Assemblies across other continents might well expose different patterns and shed more light on the application of the principle of the equality of women and men in this one aspect.

These show that in every year at least one woman was elected to these national bodies and in most years there was more than one. In Britain in the early years until 1933, women tended to outnumber men on the National Assembly, while from 1934 to 1943 the men outnumbered the women, with a reversal in the war years 1943 to 1946. From 1951 to 1964, the number of women dwindled significantly and from 1959 to 1972 generally only one or two women were elected. In the 21-year period 1973 to 1993, only two women were elected to the National Assembly in 12 of the years and three women in nine of those years. From 1994 to 2009, three women and six men were elected in almost every year, while in the 12 elections held between 2010 and 2021, the gender balance was more even, with 9 of

the years electing five men and four women. The election of 2022, however, saw only two women being elected.

In America, the gender balance changed significantly over time. From 1909 to 1945, only two or three women were elected each year, except for the years 1924 and 1925 when four women were elected. In the years 1946 to 2022, the genders were more balanced, with three women being elected in each of 26 years, four women in each of 41 years, and five women in 6 of the years between 2011 and 2022. (There are no statistics for the years 1922, 1933–1935, 1937–1938, 1940, and 1953).

Table 1 provides the numbers of women and men serving on the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles (comprising both the United Kingdom and Ireland until 1972, when Ireland formed its own National Spiritual Assembly and the mother National Spiritual Assembly became the United Kingdom) between 1922 and 2022 and the offices held. The electoral year for members of National Spiritual Assemblies runs from the date of their election at the national convention in April (or, since the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963, late May for years in which there is an international convention; [Universal House of Justice 1972](#)). The members of the National Spiritual Assemblies elected in the year before the international convention (e.g., 2022 for the international convention 2023) are the electors of the Universal House of Justice at the international convention.

**Table 1.** Membership of the British National Spiritual Assembly.

Year	Men	Women	Notes
1922	3	7	London/All England
1922	3	6	London; 58 women, 19 men in London Bahá'í community
13 October 1923 to 10 May 1924	5 CV JS	4 JS T	First election NSA of the British Isles
1924	5 C V JS	4 JS T	The same man is C and JS; 2 × replacements W to M, M to W
1925	5 CV JS T	4 JS	The same man is C, T and JS
1926	4 C JS T	5 V JS	The same man was C, T and JS; in this year 9 'regular' members were elected and 10 'substitutes'. The figures are for the regulars.
1927	5 CST	5 VST	10—two had tied for 9th place and both served
1928	4 CTA	5 VS	2 × bi-elections M to M and M to M
1929	2	7 CVSTA	resignation of W, possible by-election, result unclear
1930	4	5 CVSTA	
1931	3 CT	6 VS	
1932	4 (3) VA	5 (6) CST	by-election M to W
1933	4	4 CVSA ?co-T	9th member thought to be a W; S and co-T the same woman
1934	5	4 CVSTA	S and T same woman
1935	4 V	5 CSTA	
1936	6 VSA	3 CT	
1937	6 VS	3 CT	by-election W to W
1938	5 VS	4 CT	
1939	5 VS	4 CT	by-election M to M
1940	5 CVST	4 A	C and T same man
1941	5 CVT	4 S	C and T same man 2 × by-elections M to M, M to M
1942	5 CTA	4 VS	
1943	4 CT	5 VS	
1944	3 CT	6 VS	
1945	2 (3) T	7 (6) CVS	by election W to M

Table 1. Cont.

Year	Men	Women	Notes
1946	4 CVST	5 A	by-election M to M; VC and T same man
1947	5 CVSA	4 T	by-election W to W
1948	5 CVSA	4 T	
1949	5 CVS	4 T	by-election W to W
1950	5 CVST	4 R	
1951	6 CST	3 VR	3 × by elections WtoM, MtoM, MtoW
1952	6 (5) CVST	3 (4)	2 × by elections W to W, M to W
1953	5 CVST	4	
1954	5 CVST	4	3 × by-elections MtoM, MtoM, WtoW
1955	5 (CS?)	4 (VTA?)	no officers' list
1956	6 CVTS	3	VT same man
1957	6 CVTS	3	VT same man
1958	6 CVTS	3	VT same man
1959	6 (7) CVSA	3 (2) T	3 x by-elections M to M, M to M, W to M
1960	7	2	no officers' list
1961	7	2	no officers' list by-election M to M
1962	7	2	no officers' list
1963	6	3	no officers' list
1964	6	3	no officers' list; by-election M to M
1965	7	2	no officers' list
1966	7 CVT	2 S	
1967	8 CVT	1 S	
1968	8 CVT	1 S	
1969	8 CVT	1 S	by-election M to M
1970	8	1	no officers' list
1971	8 CVS	1 T	
1972	8 CVS	1 T	first election NSA of the United Kingdom; by-election M to W
1973	7 CVS	2 T	
1974	7 CVS	2 T	
1975	6 CS	3 VT	
1976	6 CVS	3 T	
1977	6 CVS	3 T	by-election M to M
1978	6 CVS	3 T	
1979	7 CVS	2 T	by-election M to M
1980	7 CVS	2 T	
1981	7 CV	2 ST	by-election M to M
1982	6 CV	3 ST	
1983	6 CVT	3 S	
1984	6 CV	3 ST	
1985	6 CVS	3 T	
1986	6 CVS	3 T	
1987	7 CVS	2 T	
1988	7 CVS	2 T	by-election M to M
1989	7 CVS	2 T	

Table 1. Cont.

Year	Men	Women	Notes
1990	7 VS	2 C T?	
1991	7 VS	2 CT	by-election M to M
1992	7 VS	2 CT	
1993	7 VS	2 CT	
1994	6 VS	3 CT	
1995	6 VS	3 CT	
1996	6 VS	3 CT	
1997	6 VS	3 CT	
1998	6 VS	3 CT	by-election: M to M
1999	6 SV(T)	3 CT	by-election: W to W
2000	6 CVS	3 T	
2001	6 VSA	3 CT	
2002	6 VSA	3 CT	
2003	6 VSA	3 CT	
2004	6 VSA	3 CT	by-election W to W
2005	5 (6) VST	4 (3) C	Sec External Aff—M by-election W to M
2006	6 VST	3 C	by-election: M to M Sec External Aff—M
2007	6 VST	3 C	Sec External Aff—M
2008	6 VST	3 C	Sec External Aff—M
2009	6 VST	3 C	by-election: M to M
2010	5 VST	4 C	
2011	5 VST	4 C	
2012	5 VST	4 C	by-election: W to W
2013	5 VST	4 C	
2014	5 (4) ST	4 (5) CV	by-election: M to W
2015	5 CST	4 V	
2016	5 (6) CSTA	4 (3) V	By-elections ×2 WtoM C and A same person
2017	6 CST	3 V	
2018	6 VST	3 C	
2019	5 (6) CST	4 (3) V	by-election W to M
2020	6 CST	3 V	
2021	5 (6) CST	4 (3) V	by-election W to M
2022 *	7 CST	2 V	

\* as at 6 January 2023; assumes people elected in April 2022 will continue to serve until May 2023. Legend: C = chairman; V = vice chairman; S = secretary; JS = joint secretary; T = treasurer; and A = assistant secretary. Note: The figures above are the result of the first election; numbers in brackets are changes as a result of a by-election, where known. In the elections from 1923 to 1926, 'substitute' members were elected as well as 'regular' members. Different sources record the membership and officer positions differently, particularly in the earlier years, when the processes for election were not well understood. Thus the statistics below may not be completely accurate for every year.

The numbers of women and men elected to this National Spiritual Assembly were fairly evenly balanced from 1922 until 1955, with the number of women only falling to three between 1936 and 1940, and in 1951. From 1956, the numbers of women fall to three and do not rise to four until 2005 (nearly half a century) and dropping to two in 17 of those years and to only one in five of those years. From 2006 until 2009, there were three women on the

National Spiritual Assembly and between 2010 and 2013, there were four. A by-election in 2014 brought a fifth woman onto the National Spiritual Assembly for the first time since 1946, although at the election in 2015 the number of women fell to four, and thereafter was between three and four until the 2022 election, where the number of women dropped to two for the first time since 1993.

There were approximately 100 different people serving on the National Spiritual Assembly during this 100-year period. Of these 39 were women, 11 of whom served for 13 years or longer (of these 6 served for 15 years or longer; and of these one served for 31 years). 16 different men each served for 13 years or longer (of these, 12 served for 15 years or longer, four of these serving for 25 years or longer, and one served for 32 years). The average length of service for women is 8.25 years and for men 9.5 years.

The statistics for officer holders on the National Spiritual Assembly are not available for every year. For years we do have statistics, the chairmanship was held by women for 38 years (34 of these by three women, two for 10 years each, and one for 14 years) and by men for 55 years (32 of these by two men, one for 17 years and one for 15 years). The vice chairmanship was held by women for 22 years and by men for 70 years. The secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly is its 'chief executive officer, and as such acts not only as liaison with the national committees, the Local Spiritual Assemblies and all the friends, but generally represents the National Spiritual Assembly and the Faith itself' to the wider community ([Universal House of Justice 1981](#)). This office was held by a woman 25 times and a man 67 times. The treasurer, who prepares and manages the budgets and heads the finance office, has been a woman 46 times and a man 45 times. For no year was a woman not elected to an office, whereas in four years it appears that no men were officers.

For the United States (Table 2), statistics begin with the precursor to the National Spiritual Assembly, the Bahá'í Temple Unity, which was the body created to oversee the early stages of the development of a Bahá'í house of worship (Mashriqu'l-Adhkár) in Wilmette, Illinois, near Chicago, the purchase of land, financing and contracts, and acting as a conduit for correspondence with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Over time the organization took on other responsibilities related to this purpose, such as the dissemination of information, keeping track of membership and other administrative roles.

As with many other National Spiritual Assemblies, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States emerged in 1948 from a geographically wider body, that of the United States and Canada, the latter having its own institution from that year.

While women were generally under-represented in North America across the whole period 1909–1975, and in Britain from 1936 to 1995 and in the 2020s (excepting the war years of 1943–1945), it is useful to note that they were usually at or near 'critical mass' (gendered critical mass, a percentage of a cohort, e.g., of legislators, is based on the idea that the number of women in the cohort makes a significant positive difference to the decision-making outcomes). Available statistics suggest this pattern has been replicated across much of the world since 1970s. Those statistics also suggest the percentage of women serving on local Bahá'í bodies has been higher throughout the Bahá'í history of each country.

When the Berlin wall fell in 1989, marking the end of the Cold War and the opening of the so-called eastern bloc to travel, trade, and previously proscribed activities, the Bahá'ís, who had been living in these countries, as well as visiting Bahá'ís, were able to spread the religion widely. Taking advantage of the new freedoms, the Universal House of Justice instituted a two year plan for Eastern Europe (1990–1992) and 10 new national assemblies were formed in the former Eastern Bloc in the period 1991–1994, bringing the European total to 30.

Table 3 (see [Bahaipedia 2021](#)) gives a flavour of the reach and institutional development in the last 40 years of the 20th century—across many continents and island groups—as well as the rate of growth and the participation of women. Almost all the National Spiritual Assemblies existing today were first elected by 1998. The number of women being elected to these institutions seems to reflect, to some extent, the cultural norms about women's role in society in each country.



**Table 2.** Membership of the American National Spiritual Assembly (Statistics of initial election; by-elections not recorded).

Year	Men	Women	Comments
1909	6	3	Bahai Temple Unity
1910	7	2	
1911	7	2	
1912	7	2	
1913	6	2	as reported
1914	7 PST	2 VF	
1915	7 PST	2 VF	
1916	7 PST	2 VF	
1917	6 C	3	
1918	6 PST	3 VF	
1919	7	2	
1920	6	3	
1921	7	2	
1922			no records
1923	6 PST	3 VF	
1924	5 CS At	4 T	
1925	5 CS At	4 T	First election NSA of US and Canada
1926	7 CS	2 T	
1927	6 CVST	3	
1928	6 CVST	3	
1929	7 CVST	2	
1930	7 CVST	2	
1931	7 CVST	2	
1932	7 S	2	other officers unknown
1933	ST		other records unknown
1934	CST		other records unknown
1935			no records
1936	8 CVST	1	
1937	S		other records unknown
1938	CS		other records unknown
1939	7 CSTR	2	
1940			records not found
1941	7 CSTR	2	
1942	7 CVSTR	2	
1943	7 CVSTR	2	
1944	7 CVSTR	2	
1945	7 CVST	2 R	
1946	5 VST	4 CR	
1947	5 VST	4 CR	

Table 2. Cont.

Year	Men	Women	Comments
1948	5 VST	4 CR	NSA of the United States
1949	5 VST	4 CR	
1950	5 CST	4 VR	
1951	5 CVST	4 R	
1952	5 CST	4 VR	
1953			In this year 2 M and 3 W 'pioneered'—no records found
1954	6 CVST	3 A	
1955	6 CVT	3 AR	
1956	5 CVST	4 AR	
1957	5 CVST	4 AR	
1958	5 CVST	4 AR	
1959	5 CVST	4 AR	
1960	6 CVST	3 AR	
1961	6 CVST	3 AR	
1962	5 CVST	4 AR	
1963	5 CVST	4 AR	
1964	6 CVST	3 AR	
1965	6 CVST	3 AR	
1966	6 CVST	3 AR	
1967	6 CVST	3 AR	
1968	6 CVST	3 AR	
1969	6 CVST	3	
1970	6 CVST	3	
1971	5 CVS	4 AT	
1972	5 CVS	4 TA	
1973	5 CVS	4 TA	
1974	6 CVS	3 TA	
1975	6 CVS	3 TA	
1976	6 CVS	3 T	
1977	6 CVS	3 TA	
1978	6 CSV	3 TA (admin) A(teaching)	
1979	6 CVS	3 TA	
1980	6 CVS	3 TA	
1981	5 CVS	4 TA	
1982	5 CVS	4 TA	
1983	5 CS	4 VT	
1984	5 CVS	4 T	
1985	5 CVS	4 T	
1986	7	2	

Table 2. *Cont.*

Year	Men	Women	Comments
1987	7	2	
1988	6	3	
1989	6	3	
1990	6	3	
1991	6	3	
1992	6	3	
1993	5	4	
1994	5	4	
1995	5	4	
1996	5	4	
1997	5	4	
1998	6	3	
1999	6	3	
2000	6	3	
2001	5	4	
2002	5	4	
2003	5	4	
2004	5	4	
2005	5	4	
2006	5	4	
2007	5 S	4	
2008	5 S	4	
2009	5 S	4	
2010	5 S	4	
2011	4 S	5	
2012	4 S	5	
2013	4 S	5	
2014	4 S	5	
2015	5 S	4	
2016	4 S	5	
2017	4 S	5	
2018	5 S	4	
2019	5 S	4	
2020	5 S	4	
2021	5 CS	4 T	
2022 *	5 S	4	

\* as at 15 December 2022; assumes people elected in April 2022 will continue to serve until May 2023. Legend: C—chairman; V—vice chairman; S—secretary; T—treasurer; A—assistant secretary; R—recording secretary; P—president; F—finance officer; At—assistant treasurer. Note: The statistics for the United States are only for the 48 contiguous states; Alaska and Hawaii have their own National Spiritual Assemblies.

**Table 3.** National (or local) Spiritual Assembly throughout the World.

Name of National (or Local) Spiritual Assembly	Date First Formed	Number of Women Elected (out of 9) onto First NSA
Brazil	1961	4 (stats for 1962–1963)
Chile	1961	4
Gilbert and Ellice Islands (later Kiribati)	1967	3
Fiji	1970	2
Samoa	1970	5
Trinidad and Tobago	1971	4
First LSA in Greenland formed, in Nuuk	1979	3
Bermuda	1981	4
Cook Islands	1985	5
Guinea Bissau	1989	?3
LSA of Ishqabad (reformed after 60 years)	1989	3
Macau	1989	4
Czechoslovakia	1991	4
Romania	1991	3
Soviet Union	1991	2
West Leeward Islands	1991	6
Angola	1992	2
Azerbaijan	1992	2
Central Asia	1992	3
Greenland	1992	5
Hungary	1992	4
Niger	1992	1
Poland	1992	4
Kazakhstan	1994	6
Mongolia	1994	3
Tajikistan	1994	3
Belarus	1995	6
Georgia	1995	2
Sicily	1995	2

#### 4.2.4. Statistics in Context

The statistics relating to women serving on National Spiritual Assemblies year on year indicate that they are at or near critical mass most of the time. For a comparison of sorts, the British House of Commons has 650 Members of Parliament (MPs), of which 224 are women ([House of Commons Library 2022](#)). The unelected House of Lords has 776 members (including Lord Bishops), 550 men, and 226 women ([Statista 2022b](#)). Thus 34 per cent of MPs and 29 per cent of members of the House of Lords are women. The first woman to be elected to the House of Commons was Constance Markievicz, in the general election of 1918, but she did not take her seat, a policy of her party, Sinn Féin. Nancy Astor (Viscountess Astor) was the first women to take her seat, after a by-election in December 1919. Women were not allowed to sit in the House of Lords until the passage of the Life Peerages Act 1958, and hereditary women peers were able to be seated only after the Peerage Act 1963 ([UK Parliament 2022](#)).

In the United States, there are a total of 100 senators and 435 members of the House of Representatives. ‘Women in Congress: Statistics and Brief Overview’ reported on 13 October 2022: ‘As of 12 October 2022, 151 women are serving in the 117th Congress. There are 127 women serving in the House (including 3 Delegates and the Resident Commissioner), 93 Democrats and 34 Republicans. There are 24 women in the Senate, 16 Democrats and 8 Republicans’ ([Congressional Research Service 2022](#)). A Pew Research report notes: ‘Women make up just over a quarter of all members of the 117th Congress—the highest percentage in U.S. history and a considerable increase from where things stood even a decade ago’ ([Blazina and Desilver 2021](#)). The first woman to be elected to the Senate was Hattie Caraway, in January 1932. The first woman to be elected to the House was Jeannette Rankin, in November 1916.

Another comparison of female participation can be made with the role of women in other religions. A cursory exploration—and direct experience gained over 30 years’ involvement with the interfaith movement as a member of Bedford Council of Faiths—indicates that the picture across the religions varies depending on beliefs and practices of a particular branch or denomination within the wider community. For example, some of the Christian denominations in the late 18th and early 19th century United States seem to have accepted women preachers and some ordained women (see [Billington 1985](#), pp. 369–94). The Roman Catholic tradition has no female clergy, although there is a movement for the ordination of women (see, for example, [Women’s Ordination Worldwide 2022](#) and its Timeline ([Women’s Ordination Worldwide 2020b](#))).<sup>8</sup> The Pope has expressed his wish to include more women in senior positions, naming in July 2022 three women to the committee that advises him in the selection of bishops ([Pullella 2022](#)). The Anglican Communion ordained its first woman priest in 1944, in Macau ([Women’s Ordination Worldwide 2020a](#)), and there are now women Anglican bishops in 15 countries ([Mueller 2022](#)). The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) embedded the equality of women and men into their doctrine from their beginning in the mid-17th century England and women were able to enter Quaker ministry, although the ease with which they were able to practise it ebbed and flowed over time ([O’Shea 2022](#), pp. 263–76). The Methodists ordained their first female deacon in 1866 in Indiana, USA ([United Methodist Church 2022](#)).

The first woman to become a rabbi was Regina Jonas, ordained in Berlin in 1935 by the leading liberal rabbi of the time. She died in Auschwitz in 1944. The first Reform Jewish rabbi and the first American woman rabbi, Sally J. Priesand, was ordained in 1972. In 1974, the first Reconstructionist woman rabbi, Sandy Sasso, was ordained. The first Conservative woman rabbi, Amy Eilberg, was ordained in 1985. Mimi Feigelson, the first woman Orthodox rabbi, was ordained in Jerusalem in 1994 ([Jewish Women’s Archive 2022](#)).

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, established the principle of the equality of women and men at the beginning of the religion around the end of the 15th century, and this ‘fundamental truth’ has been upheld by those gurus who followed him. Women are ‘allowed to participate in any and all religious activities including reading of the Guru Granth Sahib’, their holy scripture ([Sikhs.org 2011](#); [Kaur 2022](#)). As is the case with other faith communities, including the Bahá’ís, the practical application of the principle in everyday life can be challenging for some ([Singh 2013](#)).

Regarding Islam, the Quran does not forbid women from taking on clerical roles but the Traditions (hadith)<sup>9</sup> are opposed to it and cultural norms may prevent it. As with other religions, the discourse is generally theological and turns on interpretation. There are some instances where women do become prayer leaders (imams) or scholars (ulama), notably in Indonesia (see e.g., [Gunia 2022](#); [BBC News 2017](#); [Borpujari 2017](#); [Rinaldo 2017](#)) and China (see e.g., [Zacharias 2019](#); [Erie 2016](#)) but generally for women-only congregations. There appears to be widespread agreement that women cannot lead prayers for men or for mixed congregations. At the same time, there is a tendency to apply western liberal thinking and norms to practices about which there is a general misunderstanding and lack of knowledge among non-Muslims, and a significant amount of prejudice (see [Nyhagen 2021](#); [Soltani 2016](#)), which is also the case for other religions and beliefs.



Religious belief and practice is complex and many issues are controversial, even within religious communities. This brief overview gives a glimpse of how the participation of women in religious leadership is perceived and operationalized among and within religious communities. Absent agreement on scriptural authority, as well as prevailing cultural norms and attitudes, many women have found the progress towards full participation very slow, whereas others do not consider such leadership to be relevant within their religious tradition. All faiths, however, seem to consider such roles to be positions of service rather than of power, although there are clearly some who abuse this.

Bahá'ís are realistic about the interpretation of statistics to gauge the participation of women in administrative and governance positions, and the Universal House of Justice cautions against their use to seek the goal sought by some feminists, gender parity (see [WEDO Primer 50/50 Campaign n.d.](#); [European Women's Lobby n.d.](#); [50:50 Parliament n.d.](#)):

Statistics on the participation of women on Bahá'í institutions are compiled from time to time by Bahá'í agencies, including the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office for the Advancement of Women, and have been published on occasion in the annual Bahá'í World year book. However, caution should be observed in their interpretation, because of the small size of the Bahá'í communities in most countries, and the differences in the traditional attitudes toward the participation of women in the various cultures represented in the worldwide community. It would also be improper to use these results in an attempt to ensure that the composition of institutions is evenly balanced between the sexes, since believers are enjoined to select those best qualified to serve, irrespective of their sex. The Faith does not seek to promote the advancement of women through an artificial endeavour to achieve parity, but rather through a fundamental transformation of values and understanding coupled with the creation of opportunities and encouragement for the development of talents and capabilities ([Universal House of Justice 1999](#), no. 307).

Further, despite women reaching critical mass in many instances, there is no research into the effect in a Bahá'í setting of women's membership of an institution and whether the presence of women has any significant influence on decision-making. What can be noted is the operationalization of the principle of equality of participation as between men and women. From the examples provided, it seems the main conclusion that can be drawn is that women actually get elected, although in fewer numbers than men, and that they hold important positions on Bahá'í institutions.

#### 4.2.5. Bahá'í Focus on the Advancement and Participation of Women

The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975 to 1985, was adopted on 15 December 1975 by General Assembly Resolution 31/136. It focused on the policies and issues that impact women, such as pay equity, gendered violence, land holding, and other human rights. The Universal House of Justice and the Bahá'í International Community responded to the recommendations for this decade by urging Bahá'í women around the world to arise and play an active role in the service of the Faith ([Universal House of Justice 1977](#); [Collins 1981](#), pp. 202–14). During this period a series of Bahá'í women's conferences were held, including in the Solomon Islands, 1975 ([Bahá'í World 1978](#), p. 282); New Delhi, 1977 ([Bahá'í World 1981](#), p. 180); Lima, Peru, 1977 ([Bahá'í World 1981](#), p. 172); Niger, 1978 ([Bahá'í World 1981](#), p. 154); and Monrovia, Liberia, 1978 ([Bahá'í World 1981](#), p. 154). After the Decade for Women ended, the conferences of women continued, with Maori women holding the first National Women's Hui in the tribal area of Ngati Tuwaretoa, New Zealand, 1987 ([BINS 1967](#), edition 163, p. 8); the first European Bahá'í Women's Conference, held in the Netherlands, 1989 ([BINS 1967](#), edition 203, p. 2); the first meeting of Bahá'í women in Mauritius, 1989 ([BINS 1967](#), edition 215, p. 6); and the Pacific Women's Conference, 1991 ([Universal House of Justice 1991a](#), paras. 110.1–3).

There were also some milestones for the participation of indigenous women, often overlooked or excluded from the political arena owing to the intersectionality of prejudices, towards women, race/ethnicity, and social status. In 1990 Maureen Nakekea and Marao Teem were elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of Kiribati, the first indigenous women to be elected to that institution (BINS 1967, edition 224, p. 7), and in the same year, for the first time, two Saramaka (Maroon) women were elected delegates to the national convention of Suriname (BINS edition 226, p. 6).

In 1992, the Universal House of Justice announced it was establishing an Office for the Advancement of Women at the headquarters of the Bahá'í International Community in New York (Universal House of Justice 1992), to provide a 'visible instrument for the practical application of one of the cardinal principles of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh'. It officially opened on 26 May 1993 (Bahá'í World 1994, pp. 83–9; BINS 1967, edition 296, p. 2).

It seems clear that the Universal House of Justice writes encouragingly to the Bahá'ís about the successes they have made in 'closing the gender gap' within the Bahá'í community but is wholly realistic about great efforts that remain to be made. The steps taken are incremental, in keeping with the gradual unfolding and implementation of the Bahá'í teachings taken by Bahá'u'lláh himself and after him by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. That the implementation of the core teaching of the equality of women and men is foundational to the new kind of society the Bahá'ís are working towards is seen in the urging of the Universal House of Justice to Bahá'ís to increase their efforts year on year.

The commitment of the Universal House of Justice over the years to the advancement of women may be determined by its directives to National Spiritual Assemblies to broaden their work in this area. For example, to the Bahá'í International Women's Conference in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, held in October 1991, the Universal House of Justice wrote:

The contribution of women to social, economic and cultural development is paramount. As the primary educators of children, women must themselves be educated and receive literacy training. As wives and mothers, as members of the professions, as farmers, as stewards of the health and well-being of families, and as members of Bahá'í administrative institutions, women must be welcomed into full partnership with men in consultative decision-making and in guiding the progress of their communities (Universal House of Justice 1991b, para. 116.1).

In 1996, the Universal House of Justice sent messages to different regions of the world asking the Bahá'ís in each to take particular steps to increase their efforts to advance the status, administrative participation and other activities of women. For example, the Bahá'ís of the Indian Subcontinent were called upon 'to give special attention to the advancement of women' as in that region 'women have traditionally played a secondary role in the life of society, a condition which is still reflected in many Bahá'í communities. Effective measures have to be adopted to help women take their rightful place in the teaching and administrative fields ... ' (Universal House of Justice 1996b). Malaysian Bahá'ís were asked to take 'concrete measures to broaden the range of activities in areas such as the advancement of women, the spread of literacy, and the promotion of moral education' (Universal House of Justice 1996c) whereas the Africans were asked to 'multiply plans and programmes to raise the status of women and to encourage the active support of men in such endeavours' (Universal House of Justice 1996d). In Pakistan, Western and Central Asia needed to enable 'more and more women' 'to move to the forefront of Bahá'í activity', including in 'administrative fields' (Universal House of Justice 1996e).

By April 2000, there were 52 national offices for the advancement of women (Universal House of Justice 2000a).

The equality of women and men was again made a goal by the Universal House of Justice in 2021 in its letter launching a 25 year cycle of activity focusing on the building of 'vibrant communities' (Universal House of Justice 2021b).

My observation is that these efforts indicate the commitment of the Universal House of Justice to the advancement of women and to the creation of a culture within the global Bahá'í community that enables all Bahá'í women to participate in the election of its administrative

institutions and to become elected members, as well as to take on many other activities and roles. This has required a change in the mind set of all Bahá'ís, not only men, from many different national and cultural backgrounds, an accomplishment not easily achieved.

#### 4.2.6. Persecution in Iran

At the same time that Bahá'ís were working towards the realization of a more just and equitable society, the Islamic Revolution occurred in Iran in 1979, restricting certain freedoms held by Iranian women but also seeing a dramatic uptick in the persecution of the Bahá'í community there. The persecution was widespread and included women and girls, some of whom were executed. As Iran is rarely out of the news for its persecution of women and girls, the effect on Bahá'í women and girls is important to record.

On 21 August 1980, all nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran, including one woman, Bahíyyih Nádirí, were kidnapped, never found, and are presumed dead ([Bahá'í World 1986](#), p. 294). Eight of nine members of the Assembly elected to replace them, including one woman, Mrs Zhinus Mahmudi, were executed without trial on 27 December 1981 ([Bahá'í World 1986](#), p. 293). The second woman, Giti Vahid, was ill and did not attend the meeting at which the others were arrested ([Bahá'í Library on Line 1981](#)). A third cohort of members was elected to replace them, seven of whom were arrested and eventually executed. The National Spiritual Assembly was officially disbanded on 23 August 1983 when the Attorney General of Iran made membership of Bahá'í administrative institutions illegal (see [BIC 2013](#)).

By 21 April 1983, about 20 Bahá'í women had been 'executed, mobbed, assassinated, or disappeared without a trace, including Iran's first woman physicist, a concert pianist, and the illiterate wife of a shepherd'. On the 'evening of 18 June ten Bahá'í women, ranging in age from 17 to 57, were hanged in Shiraz, after months of imprisonment and torture during which they refused to renounce their faith' ([Bahá'í World 1994](#), pp. 180–8). Over 200 Bahá'ís are known to have been executed by the state or otherwise killed in Iran between 1978 and 2005, of which 21 are women, including a girl of 17 ([Iran Press Watch 2016](#)).

After the dissolution of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran, an informal grouping of senior Bahá'í volunteers, known as 'Friends in Iran' (Yaran), was assembled to see to the pastoral and spiritual needs of the Bahá'í community. In 2008, this group included two women, Fariba Kamalabadi, who had become a member in 2006 ([Taefi and Ghanea 2009](#), p. 96), and Mahvash Sabet. ([United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2017](#)). The Yaran were arrested on March 2008, tried in January 2010, convicted and sentenced initially to 20 years' imprisonment, reduced to 10 years on appeal ([Bahá'í World News Service 2008](#)).

Sabet was released on 18 September 2017, Kamalabadi on 31 October 2017. Both were re-arrested in July 2022 and sentenced to a further 10 years' imprisonment ([IranWire 2022a](#); [Iran Press Watch 2022](#)).

#### 4.3. Discourse

A significant contribution to this discourse was the result of the surveys undertaken by the BIC about the participation of women in Bahá'í leadership institutions across the world. It conducted three surveys over 20 years from 1972 to 1993, a period when the number of National Spiritual Assemblies increased from 113 to 151 (there are today, 2022, more than 170), marking the growth of the Bahá'í populations in a number of countries, as well as the changing political environment.

The first survey was conducted in 1972 in preparation for International Women's Year (1975), the second in 1984 at the end of the Decade for Women (1976–1985) and the third in 1993–1994. All three surveys examined—in increasing detail—'critical factors affecting the status of women' ([BIC 1995b](#)):

- \* women's participation on the elected councils that govern Bahá'í community life;

- \* ways in which Bahá'í institutions encourage women to participate in Bahá'í community life; and
- \* strategies used by Bahá'í institutions to change attitudes toward women

The present article limits itself to the examination of the first of these elements.

On 21 July 1972, as part of its effort to promote the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in advance of UN International Women's Year (1975), the BIC sent copies of the document to 113 National Spiritual Assemblies as well as a detailed questionnaire designed to determine the degree of activity of Bahá'í women in each national community. Survey questions included 'changing attitudes of both men and women—the influence of traditions and customs, the participation of Bahá'í women in Bahá'í community life (administrative activity, elections, consultation, service on Bahá'í administrative bodies, teaching activity etc.), as well as whether women were 'assuming roles considered traditionally masculine' (BIC 1974b).

By 15 January 1974, 81 responses had been received: 20 from Africa, 22 from the Americas, 12 from Asia, 11 from Australasia (including the Pacific islands), and 16 from Europe. The BIC reported its analysis of the survey's findings: that in many instances progress was greater in the Bahá'í community than in the society; and in some places there was a 'perceptible but only very gradual change in attitudes', attributed to 'the small numbers of Bahá'ís' or to 'the strong influence of traditional patterns'.

Respondents listed participation in the Bahá'í administrative process as the most 'positive influence for the integration of women in community life', enabling them to vote and be voted for and to be elected to office. For example, the questionnaire replies indicated that it was not unusual for women to serve on National Bahá'í Assemblies as well as on Local Assemblies, 'often as officers', and that they were learning 'to take leadership roles' (Jamaica), participating 'without restriction in consultation and decision-making' (Paraguay) in the local and national administrative functions of the Bahá'í community.

Hawaii indicated that 'over one half of the present membership of local Bahá'í administrative bodies are women', with 'over thirty percent of the membership of the National Assembly being women'. El Salvador reported, 'one third of the National Bahá'í Assembly are women', and that 'the percentage is about one fourth women on the Local Assemblies, and most of these Bahá'í communities are in rural areas'.

Illiteracy was not a barrier to the election of women to Bahá'í institutions: in Benin in 1976, an illiterate villager and an illiterate housewife were elected to the National Spiritual Assembly; in 1977 an illiterate market woman was elected. In 1983, the first of these three women was re-elected.

In its final report, which included eight more respondents than did the intermediate report, all but one of the 89 national communities reported that Bahá'í women were actively participating in the voting. This was attributed to the principles of no electioneering or nominations, and the secret ballot. This included communities, some in remote villages, where other aspects of the principle of equal status for women were not yet observed, where the women 'are more reticent in other activities' and 'customs are more inhibiting' than elsewhere. Some responses noted that 'this participation' is women's 'first attempt at freedom of expression' or that voting has given women 'their first opportunity to take part in administrative affairs' in their village. In certain places, participation in Bahá'í elections is the only activity of Bahá'í women, particularly in countries where traditional views hinder women 'from taking as active a part in Bahá'í community life as men'. Much depended on the social culture of the host society and the age of the voters, with younger women and those from cultures where women are already involved in other Bahá'í processes feeling more comfortable voting.

The BIC's conclusion was that in large, well-established Bahá'í communities that have been developing for a long time, people feel more able to implement the Bahá'í principle of equality of women and men as they feel more secure and free to do so.

Even in places where 'by tradition, women seldom speak when men are present', and are discriminated against, women do get elected, including in places 'where only men serve

on village councils' and they are sometimes elected as officers of the assembly. The BIC notes, 'In many parts of Africa women are often elected Treasurers, as they are "considered good managers of money and are reliable".'

In October 1983, the Bahá'í International Community sent the 143 National Spiritual Assemblies then existing a questionnaire about activities organized during the United Nations Decade for Women to achieve equality for women and to report on obstacles faced. It reported its findings, based on reports of 77 National Assemblies, in July 1985 (BIC 1985).

Although providing no statistics for the participation of women in Bahá'í governing structures, the BIC noted: 'The most frequently mentioned positive influence for the integration of women in community life, according to the questionnaire replies, has been the Bahá'í administrative order. Responses from National Spiritual Assemblies included:

Though traditionally women do not take a real role in decision-making, Bahá'í women are elected to local and national Bahá'í administrative posts. As they serve in these positions, they educate other women (Samoa).

... the equality of women had been enhanced by wider administrative experience (and that women are both) included in most of the national and regional committees appointed by the National Spiritual Assembly and also serve on many Local assemblies (Nigeria).

Women participate 'without restriction in consultation and decision-making' at both the local and national levels: 'Women both vote and are elected' (Paraguay).

In 1990, the BIC published its response to a questionnaire received from the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) that covered issues related to the status and advancement of women, including equal participation (BIC 1990b). The BIC had surveyed the 151 National Spiritual Assemblies then existing as well as those institutions appointed to support them.

Recent statistics show substantial participation of women on Bahá'í administrative bodies. In 1988, 27% of those elected to serve on national governing councils were women. In 1989, 25% of the members of continental advisory boards and 29% of their auxiliary boards were women. At the 1988 International Convention, plenary sessions involving members of over 140 National Bahá'í Councils were chaired by women members of the advisory boards.

In 1994, the BIC undertook its third survey of National Spiritual Assemblies to measure the participation of women a hundred years after the religion had first been brought to the West. The findings were published in August 1995 as part of a larger document of several sections presented to the Fourth UN Conference on Women, titled 'The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs' (BIC 1995a).

The 1994 survey collected data on women's participation in the administrative activities of the Bahá'í community from two sources: the elected national institutions and the members of the appointed branch of the Bahá'í administrative order (Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members) whose functions—advising, protecting, and encouraging the community—complement those of the elected branch, which is charged with administering the affairs and activities of the Bahá'í community at the national or local level. The BIC commented that the 'information gathered sheds light on the transformation process itself and shows how these complementary institutions are promoting—each in its own way—the process of understanding and implementing the principle of equality of the sexes'.

Responses were received from 92 of the 165 National Spiritual Assemblies and 254 (65%) of the 389 Auxiliary Board members serving worldwide at the time. (Reliability of the survey sample was validated by comparing membership statistics on all 165 National Spiritual Assemblies, collected by the Bahá'í World Centre, to the same information reported by the National Assemblies responding to the survey.)

The proportion of women serving on the 92 responding National Spiritual Assemblies was 30% (that is, on average, three out of the nine members were women). BIC noted that the percentage had remained constant since its first survey in 1972 and 'is consistent



with the percentage for all 165 National Assemblies, according to statistics gathered by the Bahá'í World Centre'. 41% of the national secretaries were women. As noted above, this position is akin to that of the CEO of a company and is both 'highly responsible' and 'visible'. The BIC remarks that the results demonstrate 'the degree to which Bahá'ís . . . are attempting to overcome traditional prejudices'.

Survey data on 4680 local Bahá'í communities (approximately a quarter of the organized communities worldwide) indicated that an increasing number of women were being elected to serve at the grassroots. 40% of the members of local spiritual assemblies were women, as well as half the local secretaries, and a third of the local treasurers.

The BIC provided its own evaluation of these statistics in light of the principle of the equality of women and men.

Although these statistics put the Bahá'í community well ahead of the world at large in the participation of women in leadership, the Bahá'í community has yet to fulfil its own goal of full equality between women and men. For the vast majority of the Bahá'ís in the world today, many of whom are the first in their families to become Bahá'ís, the values and habits they have been brought up with are not easy to shake. But by becoming Bahá'ís they commit themselves to a process of individual and social transformation, based on the fundamental reality of this age: the oneness of humanity. The equality of men and women is one important aspect of this principle. Thus the entire Bahá'í community is engaged in a shared struggle to overcome a variety of traditional prejudices, and its members are assisted in this struggle by the Bahá'í administrative institutions.

#### Men Only on the Universal House of Justice

Even such a selective survey as this of the practice of the principle of the equality of women and men in Bahá'í communities would be incomplete and misleading if it failed to address the absence of women on the Universal House of Justice. The exclusion of women from election to the Universal House of Justice is perhaps the issue most often raised in feminist circles, and in many other discussions, about the application of the principle of the equality within their own Bahá'í community. As both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, especially in His talks in the West, emphasized this principle, it is not easy to understand exactly why women cannot serve on that one institution. It seems an anomaly to many people and appears to undermine the very principle itself. The concept is very challenging for Bahá'ís to explain, as there is no explanation other than 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that the wisdom of this would become clear in the future.

The scriptural basis for this exclusion of women is from the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws:

O ye Men of Justice! Be ye, in the realm of God, shepherds unto His sheep and guard them from the ravening wolves that have appeared in disguise, even as ye would guard your own sons. Thus exhorteth you the Counsellor, the Faithful (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, para. 52).

and also in his Bishárát (Glad-Tidings):

The men of God's House of Justice have been charged with the affairs of the people. They, in truth, are the Trustees of God among His servants and the daysprings of authority in His countries (Bahá'u'lláh 1978, pp. 26–7).

'Abdu'l-Bahá, in answer to a question on this subject, wrote on 23 August 1913: As regards the constitution of the House of Justice, Bahá'u'lláh addresses the men. He says: 'O ye men of the House of Justice!' But when its members are to be elected, the right which belongs to women, so far as their voting and their voice is concerned, is indisputable ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1967, p. 183).

In answer to another question, 'Abdu'l-Bahá replied:

Know thou, O handmaid,<sup>10</sup> that in the sight of Bahá, women are accounted the same as men, and God hath created all humankind in His own image, and after His own likeness. That is, men and women alike are the revealers of His names

and attributes, and from the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between them . . .

The House of Justice, however, according to the explicit text of the Law of God, is confined to men; this for a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, p. 80).

As the appellation 'House of Justice' was given both to the Universal House of Justice and local institutions, in the early years of the religion's establishment it was unclear as to whether women were excluded from them both. 'Abdu'l-Bahá then clarified:

According to the ordinances of the Faith of God, women are the equals of men in all rights save only that of membership on the Universal House of Justice, for as hath been stated in the text of the Book, both the head and the members of the House of Justice are men. However, in all other bodies, such as the Temple Construction Committee, the Teaching Committee, the Spiritual Assembly, and in charitable and scientific associations, women share equally in all rights with men (quoted in [Universal House of Justice 1988a](#)).

This note was appended to the statement of Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

It has been elucidated in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi that, while the membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men, both women and men are eligible for election to Secondary and Local Houses of Justice (currently designated as National and Local Spiritual Assemblies) (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, n80).

The Universal House of Justice addressed the question in a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand in May 1988, pointing out that while Bahá'u'lláh deliberately left some matters open to the decision of the Universal House of Justice, others are part of the 'explicitly revealed' text and 'cannot be varied through legislation by the Universal House of Justice'. Shoghi Effendi had explained in a letter on 27 May 1940 that membership of the Universal House of Justice being 'confined to men' was part of the 'explicitly revealed' text. (Some question this reading of the text, see [Cole 1996](#)). The House of Justice went on to state:

. . . in face of the categorical pronouncements in Bahá'í Scripture establishing the equality of men and women, the ineligibility of women for membership of the Universal House of Justice does not constitute evidence of the superiority of men over women. It must also be borne in mind that women are not excluded from any other international institution of the Faith. They are found among the ranks of the Hands of the Cause. They serve as members of the International Teaching Centre and as Continental Counsellors. And, there is nothing in the Text to preclude the participation of women in such future international bodies as the Supreme Tribunal ([Universal House of Justice 1988a](#)).

Sometimes Bahá'ís put forward possible reasons for Bahá'u'lláh's exclusion of women from this international institution but these are not part of the general body of Bahá'í discourse. Reading the Bahá'í texts may provide some insights—if not into the reason for this ruling, then perhaps into some of the elements of the Bahá'í teachings that make it more explicable.

One such element arises from Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the ever-advancing civilization. Another comes from the descriptions of state of the world in the transition from the 'present world order' to the new. A third rests on an understanding of the Bahá'í concepts of equality, power, authority and justice, and fourth on the nature and characteristics of women, which this article explores. This is not the arena in which to do more than make a few comments on each and how they impact on the concept of the equality of women with men.

Briefly, the Bahá'í vision of the ever-advancing civilization seems to include, as discussed above, a reorientation of the position of women into equal partners in a joint enterprise of development of a united, sustainable, peaceful and just global community

which depends on the education of girls and the work of women to usher in and protect. The transition from the current world order to the new one (see Bahá'u'lláh 1983) requires a universal recognition of the oneness of humanity, 'the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve', and 'implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced . . . It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world—a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units' (Shoghi Effendi 1991, pp. 42–3). This requires 'that we should become a new kind of people, people who are upright, kind, intelligent, truthful, and honest and who live according to His [God's] great laws' (Shoghi Effendi 1944).

Our current understanding of equality seems much coloured by historical concepts of power and authority, rights, and privileges reflected even in the suffrage and feminist movements. These are ordered in a hierarchy of position, that is, the higher up the pyramid of power one ascends, the more 'important' that person is; the more important the person is, the more 'authority' that person has; the more authority, the more power, the greater the status and value of the person. Often this is attached to money and therefore the more status and value, the more the remuneration. At the base of the pyramid is a decision about who is able to ascend based on what the society values. What the Western society seems to value greatly is financial wealth, enabling a consumerist and entertainment-rich environment which we endeavour to maintain by promoting some kinds of work, e.g., sports players, influencers, and celebrities, up the pyramid while teachers, carers of children, the elderly, and the unwell fail to attract significant financial investment (see e.g., Garis 2007, pp. 16, 105). The Bahá'í teachings indicate that one of the most important social roles is the teacher and that the first teacher is the mother (see e.g., 'Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, pp. 133–4, 138), currently much undervalued.

As to the nature and characteristics of women, the Bahá'í teachings indicate that the future will have more feminine characteristics (Dodge 1912) and that women will enter all fields of endeavour ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1967, pp. 182–3).

Possibly as a result of our Western, liberal thinking, people are apt to equate roles of responsibility with power and authority; whereas the Bahá'í texts indicate that such roles are arenas of service to humanity (Universal House of Justice 2000b) and that there are many paths of service open to all. Membership on a Bahá'í institution brings no personal power or authority to the individual, no importance, no influence, no prestige, no wealth, no kudos, no privileges. As John Hatcher puts it, even 'if one aspired to election . . . and managed to become elected, his or her only reward would be to serve in virtual anonymity on a body whose decisions are the result of a collective process' (Hatcher 1994, p. 344). Thus when considering membership of the Universal House of Justice, it is useful to look at the actual job and not ascribe to it characteristics of spiritual or material status, such as a career might provide and which such membership does not. In this light, it is perhaps the case that we are not looking here at a question of whether women are *worthy* to serve on the House of Justice or whether men are *more* worthy; nor are we looking at whether women have the qualities to serve on the House or if men have more of them; nor are we looking at whether women, by virtue of biology, lack of education, or their nature, are fit to serve on this institution or whether men, by virtue of their biology, education, or nature are more fit to serve. We are clearly looking at some other dimension, something we cannot quite see yet. It may be that we need to change our concepts of what service on this institution means within the context of the Bahá'í teachings, rather than draw on current thinking about power and status.

Awkward as it appears to be, it seems Bahá'ís have to accept that they will probably not be able to give an adequate explanation of why women cannot serve on the House of Justice, as indicated in 1947 by Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf:

People must just accept the fact that women are not eligible to the International House of Justice. As the Master says the wisdom of this will be known in the

future, we can only accept, believing it is right, but not able to give an explanation calculated to silence an ardent feminist ([Shoghi Effendi 1947b](#))!

## 5. Theme D: Violence against Women and Girls

Another way to measure the progress of Bahá'ís in implementing the principle of the equality of women and men is to consider how the religion has responded to social issues affecting women and girls. From among many issues, I have chosen to look at violence against women and girls (VAWG), as it is a widespread phenomenon that affects women across the world regardless of age, financial or social status, culture, ethnicity, or religion.

The World Health Organization ([WHO 2021](#)) published its findings of the prevalence of violence against women and girls in March 2021, pointing out that 'violence against women—particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence—is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights'. The WHO estimates that 30 per cent of women (about one in three women) 'worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime', while almost a third (27%) of 'women aged 15–49 years who have been in a relationship report that they have been subjected to some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner'. To put this in context, it is estimated that on 2 January 2023 there were more than 3,987,000,000 women in the world. ([Country Meters 2023](#)—this site changes its figures second by second; this figure is rounded down). That is, about 1,196,100,000 women have experienced physical or sexual violence.

UN Women estimated that '81,100 women and girls were killed intentionally in 2021', a number that 'has remained largely unchanged over the past decade'. Around 45,000 women and girls were killed by intimate partners or other family members in 2021; that is 'on average, more than five women or girls are killed every hour by someone in their own family' ([UN Women 2022b](#)). While acknowledging that 'the overwhelming majority of homicides worldwide are committed against men and boys (81%)', most females (56% of all female homicides) are killed by intimate partners or other family members, while this is so for only 11% of male homicides.

### 5.1. Bahá'í Texts

The light of men is Justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men ([Bahá'u'lláh 1978](#), p. 67).

Ye have been forbidden in the Book of God to engage in contention and conflict, to strike another, or to commit similar acts whereby hearts and souls may be saddened ([Bahá'u'lláh 1992](#), para.148).

... in view of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exhortation that each member of the family must uphold the rights of the others ... it [is] clear that violence in the family is contrary to the spirit of the Faith and a practice to be condemned. It is clearly evident from the Bahá'í teachings that no husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, much less to violence; 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 Bahá'í consultation and totally devoid of the use of force to compel obedience to one's will. Of course, the prohibition against subjecting one's marriage partner to physical force applies to women, as well ([Universal House of Justice 1987](#)).

Among the signs of moral downfall in the declining moral order are the high incidence of violence within the family, the increase of degrading and cruel treatment of spouses and children, and the spread of sexual abuse. It is essential that the members of the community of the Greatest Name take the utmost care not to be drawn into acceptance of such practices because of their prevalence. They must be ever mindful of their obligations to exemplify a new way of life

distinguished by its respect for the dignity and rights of all people, by its exalted moral tone, and by its freedom from oppression and from all forms of abuse (Universal House of Justice 1993).

The use of force by the physically strong against the weak, as a means of imposing one's will and fulfilling one's desires, is a flagrant transgression of the Bahá'í teachings. There can be no justification for anyone compelling another, through the use of force or through the threat of violence, to do that to which the other person is not inclined. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written, 'O ye lovers of God! In this, the cycle of Almighty God, violence and force, constraint and oppression, are one and all condemned.' Let those who, driven by their passions or by their inability to exercise discipline in the control of their anger, might be tempted to inflict violence on another human being, be mindful of the condemnation of such disgraceful behaviour by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh (Universal House of Justice 1993).

True equality between men and women will not be established unless prevailing conceptions of power that dominate contemporary thought are seriously questioned and fundamentally redefined . . . current conceptions of power tend to focus on the capacity to pursue one's self-interests, to compete effectively, to get others to act according to one's will, to dominate, to manipulate and to prevail over or against others . . . Understood and enacted in these terms, abuses of power and the unequal distribution of material sources and instruments of power have resulted in innumerable hardships and great suffering for women historically and into the present day . . . A reconceptualization of power in this sense requires a broadened appreciation of the sources of power available to humanity, which include the limitless and generative powers of unity, love, justice and equity, knowledge, humility, integrity and truthfulness—powers humanity has been learning to draw upon over the centuries. Expressions of power emanating from these sources can be seen in the capacity to work creatively and constructively with others in the pursuit of common goals, the capacity to cooperate, and the capacity to transform social reality to reflect spiritual truths such as the equality of women and men. As we move beyond the material struggle to exercise power over or against others, and we develop the capacity to draw on these other sources of power accessible to every human being, we activate greater forms of individual and collective agency and create new possibilities for the well-being of women and men (Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity 2009).

## 5.2. Praxis

It appears from the Bahá'í texts on the subject of eradicating violence against women and girls that the issue is taken seriously by the religion and that all forms of violence are prohibited including physical domestic abuse, sexual abuse, controlling and coercive behaviour, the abuse of children, and harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation of girls.

It is acknowledged by the Bahá'ís that violence is one manifestation of deep-rooted ideas about men and women that conflict with Bahá'í teachings and that the process of altering these concepts may well take generations of work, particularly as these beliefs are built into the very structures of social institutions. This may look like complacency but it fits into the general understanding of the Bahá'ís that for social change to become permanent in a community at any level requires continuous small-step efforts by individuals, communities, and their institutions. The consciousness of the moral wrongness of violence against women and girls is being raised at every level and there is evidence that practical steps have been taken to eliminate it from Bahá'í family and community life. Just bringing the issue into the open has enabled discussion and in some places an educational process has been put in place that has extended beyond the Bahá'ís themselves in local and national



arenas. The Bahá'í International Community has engaged with UN processes on this area of concern over several decades.

A Bahá'í International Community communication project, 'Traditional Media As Change Agent', funded by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) promoted change in attitudes towards women in three countries: Bolivia, Cameroon, and Malaysia (BIC 1994b). The project tested the validity of using traditional media (e.g., music, dance, story-telling) to educate the community about the need to improve the status of women and to help establish priorities for community action with a view to reducing violence against women, especially within families, and including reducing harmful traditional practices, particularly the practice of female genital mutilation. FGM is deemed 'contrary to the spirit of the Bahá'í Teachings' and owing to the 'dire consequences' of the practice, 'the Bahá'í institutions have the duty of weaning the friends from it through an ongoing programme of education based on spiritual principles and sound scientific information' (Universal House of Justice 1995a).

To mark the International Year of the Family, the BIC's Office for the Advancement of Women in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) brought together in May 1994 grassroots practitioners, academics, mental health professionals, and representatives from more than 30 non-governmental organizations and two UN agencies for a two-day symposium to explore how to tackle domestic violence (BIC 1994a).

Among the conclusions that emerged in consensus from the symposium were: Family violence must be publicly acknowledged as a problem, as denial is the greatest obstacle to eradicating family violence. People must be helped to recognize violence when it occurs and be provided with the necessary legal and emotional support. Family violence is a human rights issue and effective use of a human rights framework to create violence-free families requires enforcement of international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as measures to protect women and children from perpetrators.

Participants proposed a set of recommendations, including: consolidate and disseminate information on successful intervention models and preventive programmes; provide support and training for front-line child-care givers—families, social workers, and traditional birth attendants—in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of family violence; sensitize police, judiciary, policy makers, and religious leaders regarding the mental health, economic, and social consequences of family violence and train them in preventive strategies; create public awareness through all forms of media and existing community networks, presenting family violence as a serious problem with serious consequences; organize classes for boys and girls to develop an egalitarian approach to parenting and other roles—i.e., sharing of chores and resources; providing opportunities for girls outside the home, including education and job training; educate women and children about their rights and facilitate the development of strategies to protect themselves; provide intervention and support for victims of family violence, including counselling, shelters, crisis centres, and financial and legal support.

A number of Bahá'í communities held seminars and conferences on eradicating family violence. The Bahá'ís of Antigua held a symposium from 24 May to 26 May 1995 to consult on strategies to eliminate family violence, which was attended by representatives from 11 Caribbean nations, UNICEF, and the Caribbean Community Secretariat. The Bahá'ís of Yokohama, Japan held a similar symposium on 5 November 1995. A conference on the same theme was held in Gaborone, Botswana, arranged by the Bahá'í National Women and Child Education Committee (Bahá'í World 1997, pp. 84–5).

The Bahá'í community of Tonga offered a seminar on education at the NGO Forum at the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women in August and September 1995, the only Tongan NGO represented there. As a result, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Women's Affairs Division, invited the Bahá'ís to participate in a national campaign to prevent domestic violence. In conjunction with this efforts, a seminar on the 'Violence-Free Family'

was held on 15 April 1996 in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, attended by the Honorable Prince Ma'atu and his wife the Honorable Alaileula, the granddaughter of the Malietoa, the Head of State of Western Samoa; the speaker of the Legislative Assembly; the High Commissioner of Tonga to the United Kingdom; and the Head of the United States Peace Corps. Two Bahá'ís from the United Kingdom spoke about the causes of violence in the family and creating peaceful families. The seminar marked the first time the issue of family violence had been addressed in that manner in Tonga. In the following years the Tongan Bahá'ís continued to be part of a national effort to educate families across the country in eliminating violence in families and domestic violence ([Bahá'í World 1997](#), vol. 24, p. 84; see also [Ma'a Fafine mo e Famili 2012](#); and [Emberson-Bain 1998](#)).

A mapping of faith-based responses to violence against women and girls in the Asia-Pacific region was undertaken in 2012 by consultants to the AsiaPacific Women, Faith and Development Alliance (AP-WFDA) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The purpose was 'to identify and document the efforts of selected faith-based organizations to address violence against women and girls in the Pacific, South Asia and South-East Asia sub-regions' (p. 7). Organizations were chosen from those working within the framework of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([United Nations 1979](#)), although this is misnamed in the document itself ('Violence' is substituted for 'Discrimination'). The Bahá'ís were included in the mapping exercise, giving examples of the educational efforts undertaken by the Bahá'í community of India to address the issue ([Kaybryn and Nidadavolu 2012](#)).

A primary objective of the Bahá'ís is to use their religion's teachings to improve their lives, their homes, and their communities ([Bahá'u'lláh 1983](#), p. 184). Over the years a number of local, national, and international organizations based on Bahá'í teachings and values have been developed by individuals (see e.g., [Universal House of Justice 2012, 2021b](#)). Those unconnected to formal Bahá'í institutions are considered to be 'Bahá'í-inspired'. Many are schools, some are foundations providing grants to development projects of different kinds, and some are based on social issues such as the environment (e.g., the [International Environment Forum 2022](#)) and business ethics ([Ethical Business Building the Future 2022](#)).

A significant Bahá'í-inspired organization working in the area of violence against women and girls is the Tahirih Justice Center ([Tahirih Justice Center 2023](#)), founded in 1997 by Layli Miller-Muro. A Bahá'í who as a law student helped a young Togolese asylum seeker fleeing a forced marriage and FGM, she won a landmark case that established gender-based persecution as grounds for granting asylum in the United States. Based on the Bahá'í values of the oneness of humanity, equity, and justice, the Tahirih Justice Center specializes in working with survivors of gender-based violence by providing free legal and social services, advocacy, and training, and has so far served over 30,000 people. Miller-Muro was CEO for 20 years and continues as a permanent member of the organization (November 2022).

There are no statistics published about the number of Bahá'í women subjected to domestic abuse. However, there is some evidence to suggest that National Spiritual Assemblies have responded to the abuse of women (and men) by creating and promulgating policies and guidelines to the local spiritual assemblies within their jurisdiction for implementation throughout their communities. Again, it has not been possible to identify many of these, as they may be documents circulated only within the Bahá'í community itself. However, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom have developed such policies and guidelines ([NSA of the United States 2002](#)). The United States also provided workshops on domestic violence (see [NSA of the United States 2003](#)).

Anecdotally, the Bahá'í Training Institute programme has been effective in enabling both men and women to address and reduce violence in their homes in three ways: implementing family consultation to discuss issues but also concepts of kindness, truthfulness, and trustworthiness that come from the first book in the programme; by building a friendship group of women who have studied together who then address these ideas among

themselves; and also being good examples to their children (Discussion at Bahá'í Training Centre, Bicester, England, 11 December 2022; the women were not Bahá'ís).

### 5.3. Discourse

The Bahá'ís have long been advocates of stopping violence in all its forms and particularly against women and girls. Examples of its contribution to the discourse on this subject come from the Bahá'í International Community and demonstrate some of the values of the Bahá'ís in this area.

The Fourth United Nations Conference on Women and the 51st session of the UN Commission on the Human Rights, took place in Beijing in August and September 1995. The BIC launched a series of statements with the overall title 'The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs' with chapters on difference themes, including one on 'Ending Violence against Women' (BIC 1995b). The statement identified violence against women as 'an issue of basic human rights', 'a distortion of power', and 'a yardstick by which one can measure the violation of all human rights. It can be used to gauge the degree to which a society is governed by aggressivity, dominated by competition and ruled by force.' It noted that 'Abusive practices against women have frequently been and are still being justified in the context of cultural norms, religious beliefs and unfounded "scientific theories" and assumptions.' It was noted that when 'families educate their daughters, and if the community systematically encourages the education of girl children, both the family and the community benefit'. However, 'Any effort to protect women against male aggression which does not involve the early training of boys will necessarily be short-lived. Likewise, all attempts to understand the causes and consequences of violence against women which do not involve men are bound to fail.'

A major issue addressed by the UN has been the spread of HIV/AIDS, which was perceived primarily as a health issue. The 2000 UN General Assembly adopted a resolution, The Millennium Declaration, incorporating goals to be achieved by 2015 (United Nations 2000) including to 'halt and begin to reverse' the spread of HIV/AIDS (Article 19) and to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women (Article 20). What became known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set out eight goals, comprising 21 targets (Asia Development Bank 2009): Goal 6 included combating HIV/AIDS and Goal 3 was to promote gender equality and the empowerment women through access to education for girls, increasing the proportion of women wage earners in the non-agricultural sector, and increasing the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. A major effort was made to educate young people about it (see, e.g., UNAIDS 2008).

The connection that seems not to have been made by the UN and its agencies was the relationship between the spread of HIV/AIDS and the prevalence of gender inequality and disregard for women and girls, the same values that underpin violence against women and girls. It was the BIC that made that connection: 'In order to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS among women, concrete changes need to occur in the sexual attitudes and behaviour of both men and women, but especially men'.

Educating women and girls is critically important, but the current power imbalance between men and women can prevent a woman from acting in her own interest. Indeed, experience has shown that educating women without educating the men in their lives may put the women at greater risk of violence. Efforts are needed, therefore, to educate both boys and girls to respect themselves and one another. A culture of mutual respect will improve not only the self-esteem of women and girls, but the self-esteem of men and boys as well, which will lead toward more responsible sexual behaviour' (BIC 2001).

Apparently frustrated at the inability of the world to reduce violence against women and girls, the BIC in 2006 issued a very strong statement to the UN, looking at the reality of the situation at every level of society, from the individual to the international, noting successes but also pointing to the failures and obstacles put in the way of eradicating

violence against women and girls. A few of its points serve as examples of the general approach of the religion to this matter (BIC 2006b).

The BIC called out the failure of governments to provide ‘enlightened and responsible leadership’, of adults to maintain the ‘protective web of community life’, of families to meet the fundamental moral needs of children, and religion for being the ‘most formidable obstacle to eradicating violent and exploitative behaviours’. The BIC saw these failures as ‘the shortcomings of a primarily reactive approach’ by the international community and set out its reading of what had to happen:

... the challenge now before the international community is how to create the social, material and structural conditions in which women and girls can develop to their full potential. The creation of such conditions will involve not only deliberate attempts to change the legal, political and economic structures of society, but, equally importantly, will require the transformation of individuals, men and women, boys and girls, whose values, in different ways, sustain exploitative patterns of behaviour.

Overall, the inability to make the required social change was framed by BIC as a failure to understand ‘that the individual has a spiritual or moral dimension’ that ‘shapes their understanding of their life’s purpose, their responsibilities towards the family, the community and the world’. To prevent violence from developing, it stated that we must ‘develop the moral capabilities required to function ethically in the age in which we live’. Thus its proposal, which it acknowledged as ‘controversial’, was to add to the needed changes in the ‘legal, political and economic architecture’, programmes that address the ‘moral and spiritual capabilities’ of the individual, as ‘an essential element in the as yet elusive quest to prevent the abuse of women and girls around the world’.

The BIC hosted panels on violence against women at the UN in September 2006 (Bahá’í World News Service 2006) and December 2007 (Bahá’í World News Service 2007), the latter in collaboration with the Christian Children’s Fund and in cooperation with the UN missions of France and the Netherlands. These looked at ways that national and local communities around the world could intensify efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women. It proposed the development of strategies aimed at changing old patterns of thinking in men, boys, and communities, and ‘to fight practices and attitudes that lead to violence against women’, for example, pornography being ‘accepted as a legitimate form of entertainment’, which ‘socializes men into relations with women and girls that are dangerous for their psychological, social, physical, and moral health’.

The BIC called on the international community to ‘dramatically increase the power, authority and resources dedicated to women’s human rights, gender equality and women’s empowerment’. It was part of a discussion suggesting the creation an autonomous United Nations agency with a comprehensive mandate dedicated to the full range of women’s rights and concerns; this was accomplished in 2011 with the creation of UN Women (UN Women 2023).

National Bahá’í communities have also contributed to the discourse on gender-based violence. For example, the National Spiritual Assembly of Papua New Guinea issued a statement on the equality of women and men in light of the uptick in violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was published in a national newspaper and on social media. It called gender-based violence a ‘chronic disease affecting our society’, which has ‘severely crippled’ the country’s ‘progress and prosperity’ and attributing it ‘in part ... to the failure to recognize the equality of men and women’.

The Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly reflected, ‘This is a moment when our society is thinking deeply about how its culture and traditions affect women. Religious communities have a responsibility to be a source of guidance and to help dispel superstitions that harm women.’ A representative of the country’s Bahá’í Office of External Affairs, asserted, ‘Aspects of our culture can change, particularly when we teach new values to our children from a young age. We see firsthand how girls and boys learn to interact with

unity and collaboration, and then bring these lessons home to their families.’ (Bahá’í World News Service 2020).

#### 5.4. What Do We Take from This?

Although the Bahá’ís have been active promoters of violence-free families and decry violence against women and girls, gender-based violence does occur and they accept that awareness and education need to increase across the global community, particularly the education of men and boys and of the members of Bahá’í institutions. Bahá’ís look to their three-stage education programme for children, junior youth, and youth and adults to provide the moral and spiritual insights that will challenge and transform embedded behaviours that perpetrate violence against women and girls (Ruhi Institute 2023).

### 6. A Brief Summary

This survey is by necessity limited to only a few arenas in which the Bahá’í teachings and values regarding the equality of women and men, the advancement of women and their rights have been implemented. Other areas such as the role of women in peace-making, in social and economic development, and in the environment I have reluctantly omitted. The ones I have examined—the education of the girl child, the participation in the Bahá’í administrative processes, and violence against women and girls—span decades from the founding of the religion in the mid-19th century through to the 21st century and demonstrate the evolution of the application of Bahá’í principles to the issues of the day. This period has seen girls being educated in the same way as boys, women gaining the right to vote and to be elected to sit in government, and the abuse of women exposed as ugly, unacceptable, and illegal.

All the themes selected are based on principles of the Bahá’í Faith found in the religion’s scriptures and authoritative texts of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, as well as in the oral statements of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Evidence of the practice of Bahá’ís at the individual, local, national, and international levels was not so easy to find. There is a lack of information on how violence against women and girls is addressed by the Bahá’ís in practice, although there is a vast international-level contribution to the discourse on the subject through the work of the Bahá’í International Community. This may be due to the confidential nature of the subject. On the other hand, there is much evidence regarding the participation of women in Bahá’í elections to its governing bodies and to their election onto these, yet not much discussion of this in discourses on women’s participation and leadership. The theme of the education of the girl child provides much evidence, both for its implementation within the Bahá’í community for more than a century and for the community’s contribution to the discourse on the subject.

For all the themes surveyed, Bahá’ís try to imbue their continuing efforts to advance the equality of women of men with the spiritual foundation that will ensure they are sustained over time, enhanced in their effectiveness and reach, and become part of the global transformation of all the structures of society such that the oneness of humanity and the ever-advancing civilization envisaged by Bahá’u’lláh may be realized.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** All data is available in the sources cited in the Bibliography.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lil Osborn describes in her book *Religion and Relevance* the intertwining strands of some of the social movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and discusses the relationship of the Bahá'ís and with those associated with the religion with these movements (Osborn 2014).
- <sup>2</sup> The editors of *Star of the West* note that Dodge's article 'was given to all of the New York newspapers and, through the Associated Press, was sent, though boiled down considerably, throughout the world' (Dodge 1912, p. 3).
- <sup>3</sup> The Kenosha, Wisconsin, Assembly wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1910 asking whether it should dissolve its all-male board and re-elect one including women. In March 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded to them by stating that as Kenosha had a spiritual assembly for men, it could now form one for women (Dahl 1992, pp. 21–2). It is not known whether Kenosha took up this advice. However, Dahl notes that by 1917 women were serving on the Kenosha Board.
- <sup>4</sup> A modern translation was made at the Bahá'í World Centre in 1977 (quoted in Universal House of Justice 1988a, no. 52).
- <sup>5</sup> The first Bahá'í group on the European continent was established in Paris in 1899 by May Bolles (Stockman 1995, p. 151; Shoghi Effendi 1995, p. 259) and by 1901–2 numbered some 25 to 30 Bahá'ís. The first local spiritual assembly was formed in 1923 (Blackmer 1993).
- <sup>6</sup> The first local spiritual assemblies in the United Kingdom were elected in 1922, in London, Manchester and Bournemouth. The next local spiritual assemblies were not elected until 21 April 1939, at Bradford and Torquay (M. Momen 1997, Religious Studies Homepage).
- <sup>7</sup> Currently the legal age for marriage for females is 13 (and as young as 9, with a guardian's and court's approval, see (UK Government GOV.UK 2022), which is significantly below the age of 18 that UNICEF, and feminists, advocate to prevent forced child marriage, that harms the well-being of girls (UNICEF 2022). For comparison, the age of maturity of Bahá'í children is 15 and engagement and marriage before this age is forbidden. (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, pp. 133–4)
- <sup>8</sup> I was a speaker at a synodal conference on 26 November 2022 at Ushaw, Durham, sponsored by the National Board of Catholic Women for England and Wales, 'Women at the Periphery taking Centre Stage', that was examining the issue of women's participation in the church (National Board of Catholic Women 2022).
- <sup>9</sup> The sayings and practice of the Prophet Muhammad, transmitted orally over several generations before being written down. They are regarded as a source of holy law alongside the Quran.
- <sup>10</sup> A term often used in Bahá'í texts to refer to Bahá'í women. Men are often referred to as servants.

## References

- 50:50 Parliament. n.d. Available online: <https://5050parliament.co.uk/> (accessed on 21 January 2023).
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1909. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*. Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Society, vol. 1.
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1910. *The Mysterious Forces of Civilization*. Translated by Johanna Dawud. London: Cope & Fenwick.
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1919. Tablet to the Hague, Written to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace, The Hague. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/search?q=T1\textquoterighthague> (accessed on 30 October 2022).
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1967. *Paris Talks*. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1971. *Memorials of the Faithful*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1978. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/selections-writings-abdul-baha/> (accessed on 30 October 2022).
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1982. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1987. *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 1990. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Translated by Marzieh Gail. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Amanat, Abbas. 2004. Qurrat al-'Ayn. 'Quarrat al-'Ayn: Remover of the Veil. In *Táhirih in History: Perspectives on Qurratu'l-'Ayn*. Edited by Sabir Afaqi. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press.
- Amanat, Abbas, and Farzin Vejdani, eds. 2012. *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anagol, Padma. 2006. *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920*. London: Routledge.
- Asia Development Bank. 2009. Introduction to the Millennium Development Goals. Available online: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/27727/mdg-introduction.pdf> (accessed on 1 January 2023).
- Bahá'í Faith. 2022a. The Báb: Herald of the Bahá'í Faith. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/the-bab> (accessed on 19 December 2022).
- Bahá'í Faith. 2022b. The Bahá'í Administrative Order. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/beliefs/essential-relationships/administrative-order> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Bahá'í Faith. 2023. The Official Website of the Worldwide Bahá'í Community. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/> (accessed on 2 February 2023).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1947a. A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights. Presented to the First Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Lake Success, New York. Available online: [https://bahai-library.com/bic\\_human\\_obligations\\_rights](https://bahai-library.com/bic_human_obligations_rights) (accessed on 30 October 2022).

- Bahá'í International Community. 1947b. A Bahá'í Statement on the Rights of Women. Submitted to United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, August, by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, Wilmette, Illinois. *World Order* 13: 231–2. Available online: [https://bahai.works/World\\_Order/Volume\\_13](https://bahai.works/World_Order/Volume_13) (accessed on 30 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1974a. Suggestions and Proposals for International Women's Year. Statement to the 25th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Item 3 of the provisional Agenda, New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/suggestions-and-proposals-international-womens-year> (accessed on 30 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1974b. Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Statement to the 25th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women Item 4 (A) of the Provisional Agenda: International Instruments and National Standards Relating to the Status of Women: Implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and Related Instruments, New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/elimination-discrimination-against-women> (accessed on 30 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1975. International Women's Year. Paper presented at Statement to the United Nations World Conference for International Women's Year, Mexico City, Mexico, June 19; Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/international-womens-year> (accessed on 30 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1985. Activities in the Bahá'í World Community to Improve the Status of Women during the United Nations Decade for Women, Report presented to the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Nairobi, Kenya. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/activities-bahai-world-community-improve-status-women-during-united-nations-decade-women> (accessed on 6 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1990b. Report on the Status of Women in the Bahá'í Community, Vienna, Austria. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/report-status-women-bahai-community> (accessed on 6 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1994a. Creating Violence-Free Families: A summary report of a Symposium on Strategies for Creating Violence-Free Families, Initiated by the Bahá'í International Community and co-Sponsored by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/creating-violence-free-families> (accessed on 14 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1994b. Traditional Media as Change Agent. Overview of 'Traditional Media as Change Agent', a Project Developed by the Bahá'í International Community and Funded by UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women). Overview Submitted to the Bahá'í International Community by Mona Griesser of Global Vision, the Contracting Development Organization that Executed the Project. New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/traditional-media-change-agent> (accessed on 30 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1995a. The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs: The Status of Women in the Bahá'í Community, Appendix to the 'The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs', Preliminary Analysis of the Findings of a Survey Undertaken in 1994 by the Office for the Advancement of Women of the Bahá'í International Community, Beijing, China. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/greatness-which-might-be-theirs-status-women-bahai-community> (accessed on 6 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 1995b. The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs: Ending Violence Against Women. Chapter 3 of the 'The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs', Bahá'í International Community Statement Presented to the 51st Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Beijing, China. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/greatness-which-might-be-theirs-ending-violence-against-women> (accessed on 6 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2000. The Millennium World Peace Summit: A Bahá'í Perspective, Presented by Dr. Albert Lincoln, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community. New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/millennium-world-peace-summit-bahai-perspective> (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2001. HIV/AIDS & Gender Equality: Transforming Attitudes and Behaviours. Bahá'í International Community Statement HIV/AIDS and Gender Equality: Transforming Attitudes and Behaviours Prepared for the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS, New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/hivaids-gender-equality-transforming-attitudes-and-behaviours> (accessed on 4 November 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2006a. A New Framework for Global Prosperity', submission to the 2006 Commission on Social Development on the review of the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/new-framework-global-prosperity> (accessed on 22 November 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2006b. Beyond Legal Reforms: Culture and Capacity in the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls. New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/beyond-legal-reforms-culture-and-capacity-eradication-violence-against-women-and-girls> (accessed on 18 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2007. Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights: Bahá'í International Community's comment on the United Nations. Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. Submitted to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/guiding-principles-extreme-poverty-and-human-rights> (accessed on 19 December 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2008. Seizing the Opportunity: Redefining the challenge of climate change. Initial Considerations of the Bahá'í International Community. Poznan, Poland. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/seizing-opportunity-redefining-challenge-climate-change> (accessed on 4 November 2022).

- Bahá'í International Community. 2011. Women's Health and Human Rights: The Case for Comprehensive and Sustainable Development. Bahá'í International Community's Contribution to the 44th Session of the UN Commission on Population and Development. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/womens-health-and-human-rights-case-comprehensive-and-sustainable-development> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2012. Youth and Adolescents Education in Service of Community: Bahá'í International Community's Contribution to the 45th Session of the UN Commission on Population and Development. New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/youth-and-adolescents-education-service-community> (accessed on 18 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2013. The Compliance of the Islamic Republic of Iran with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Concerning Iranian Citizens Who Are Members of the Bahá'í Community. March, a Document of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Available online: [https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/ngos/bahaiinternationalcommunity\\_iran\\_cesr50.docx](https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/ngos/bahaiinternationalcommunity_iran_cesr50.docx) (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2018a. Bahá'í International Community. Prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development. For the Betterment of the World: The Worldwide Bahá'í Community's Approach to Social and Economic Development. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/documents/osed/betterment-world.pdf?a28125bc> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2018b. Beyond Mere Economics: A Moral Inquiry into the Roots of Empowerment. A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community to the 62nd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/beyond-mere-economics-moral-inquiry-roots-empowerment> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2020. Developing New Dynamics of Power to Transform the Structures of Society. Statement to the 64th Commission on the Status of Women. UN Document: (E/CN.6/2020/NGO/1). New York. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/developing-new-dynamics-power-transform-structures-society> (accessed on 6 October 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2022a. Baha'is Accused of "Colonialism" and "Infiltrating Kindergartens" as 52 Fresh Acts of Persecution Add to More Than 100 in Recent Weeks. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/news/bahais-accused-colonialism-and-infiltrating-kindergartens-52-fresh-acts-persecution-add-more-100-recent-weeks> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2022b. Situation of Bahá'is in Iran', Documents Relevant to the Situation of Iranian Baha'is Produced by the United Nations and Its Agencies or Special Rapporteurs. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/focus-areas/situation-iranian-bahais/united-nations-documents-referencing-bahai-community> (accessed on 19 December 2022).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2023a. Available online: <https://www.bic.org> (accessed on 3 January 2023).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2023b. About Us, Timeline. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/about/about-us> (accessed on 3 January 2023).
- Bahá'í International Community. 2023c. Statements. Documents and News. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/documents-and-news-s> (accessed on 3 January 2023).
- Bahá'í International News Service (BINS). 1967. *Issued Every Two Weeks from December 1967 (Edition 1) until 2002*. A printed listing of news relating to Bahá'í communities and projects around the world. Figures in citations refer to edition number, followed by page number. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre.
- Bahá'í Library on Line. 1981. Bahá'í Chronology. Available online: <https://bahai-library.com/chronology/1981> (accessed on 11 October 2022).
- Bahá'í News. 1966. *Passing of Faithful Maidervant Anne Lynch*. Wilmette: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the US, vol. 428, p. 2.
- Bahá'í News Letter. 1925. no. 6. July-August. p. 7. Available online: [https://bahai.works/Baha%27i\\_News\\_Letter/Issue\\_6](https://bahai.works/Baha%27i_News_Letter/Issue_6) (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Bahá'í Reference Library. 2023. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Bahá'í World. 1956. *International Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities: End of Four-Year Plan for Persian Women*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, vol. 12 (1950–1954), p. 65.
- Bahá'í World. 1978. *International Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities: Solomon Islands*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, vol. 16 (1973–1976), p. 282.
- Bahá'í World. 1981. *International Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, vol. 17 (1976–1979), pp. 154, 172, 180.
- Bahá'í World. 1986. *International Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities: Persecution of the Bahá'í Community of Iran, Ridván 1979—Ridván 1983*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, vol. 18 (1979–1983), p. 294.
- Bahá'í World. 1994. *'International Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities: Persecution of the Bahá'í Community of Iran'*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, vol. 19 (1983–1986), pp. 180–8.
- Bahá'í World. 1997. *Year in Review*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, vol. 24 (1995–1996), pp. 84–5.
- Bahá'í World Faith. 1976. *Bahá'í World Faith*, 2nd ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Bahá'í World News Service. 2006. At the UN, Bahá'ís Host Panel on Violence against. September 18. Available online: <https://news.bahai.org/story/477/> (accessed on 19 December 2022).
- Bahá'í World News Service. 2007. Violence against Women Needs Global Attention, Says Panel at the U.N. Available online: <https://news.bahai.org/story/592/> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Bahá'í World News Service. 2008. Trial of Iran's Seven Baha'i Leaders. Available online: <https://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/yaran-special-report/> (accessed on 28 December 2022).



- Bahá'í World News Service. 2020. Baha'is of PNG Release Statement in Wake of Increased. Gender Based Violence in Society; Port Moresby, Papua New Guine. Available online: <https://news.bahai.org/story/1439/> (accessed on 22 November 2022).
- Bahá'u'lláh. 1978. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*; Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/tablets-bahauallah/> (accessed on 14 June 2022).
- Bahá'u'lláh. 1983. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*; Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/gleanings-writings-bahauallah/> (accessed on 14 June 2022).
- Bahá'u'lláh. 1992. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/kitab-i-aqdas/> (accessed on 14 June 2022).
- Bahaipedia. 2021. Statistics on National Spiritual Assemblies. Available online: [https://bahaipedia.org/Statistics\\_on\\_National\\_Spiritual\\_Assemblies](https://bahaipedia.org/Statistics_on_National_Spiritual_Assemblies) (accessed on 21 March 2023).
- Balyuzi, Hasan. M. 1973. *The Báb: The Herald of the Day of Days*. Oxford: George Ronald.
- Barli Development Institute for Rural Women. 2022. Available online: <https://www.barli.org> (accessed on 10 October 2022).
- BBC News. 2017. Female Islamic Clerics in Indonesia Issue Rare Child Marriage Fatwa. Available online: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-39741891> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- BBC News. 2022. Iran Protests: "No Going Back" as Unrest Hits 100 Days. Available online: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-64062900> (accessed on 2 January 2022).
- Billington, Louis. 1985. "Female Laborers in the Church": Women Preachers in the Northeastern United States, 1790–1840. *Journal of American Studies* 19: 369–94. [CrossRef]
- Blackmer, David Ned. 1993. Bahá'í Encyclopedia. Unpublished work, in private hands.
- Blazina, Carrie, and Drew Desilver. 2021. A Record Number of Women Are Serving in the 117th Congress. Pew Research Center. January 15. Available online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/15/a-record-number-of-women-are-serving-in-the-117th-congress/> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Borgen Project. 2022. Available online: <https://borgenproject.org/about-us/> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Borpajari, Priyanka. 2017. In Indonesia, Female Clerics Seek Recognition and Rights for Women. The New Humanitarian. Available online: <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/womenandgirls/articles/2017/05/31/in-indonesia-female-clerics-seek-recognition-and-rights-for-women> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Brittain, Vera. 1963. *Pethick-Lawrence: A Portrait*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Century of Light. 2001. *Century of Light*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre.
- Cole, Juan R. I. 1996. Women's Service on the Universal House of Justice. Unpublished. Available online: <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jrcole/bhwmhous.htm> (accessed on 14 March 2023).
- Collins, Rachel. 1981. Survey of Activities of Bahá'í Women in the Five Year Plan. In *The Bahá'í World 1976–1979*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, vol. 17, pp. 202–14.
- Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). 1946. ECOSOC Resolution 11(II) of 21 June 1946. Available online: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/043/10/IMG/NR004310.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed on 4 November 2022).
- Community under Siege: The Ordeal of the Bahá'is of Shiraz'. 2007. p. 4, Originally Published by Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. Available online: [https://bahai-library.com/ihrdc\\_community\\_under\\_seige](https://bahai-library.com/ihrdc_community_under_seige) (accessed on 11 November 2022).
- Congressional Research Service. 2022. Women in Congress: Statistics and Brief Overview, Updated 13 October. Available online: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R43244.pdf> (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- Country Meters. 2023. World Population. Available online: <https://countrymeters.info/en/World> (accessed on 3 January 2023).
- Dahl, Roger. 1992. History of the Kenosha Bahá'í Community. In *Community Histories: Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*. Edited by Hollinger. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, vol. 6, pp. 1–64.
- Desai-Patel, Remy. 2020. Child Poverty in the Central Africa Republic. Available online: <https://borgenproject.org/child-poverty-in-the-central-african-republic/> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Dodge, Wendell Phillips. 1912. Article for the New York City News Agency, 11 April, reproduced in *Star of the West*, 28 April 1912 (3:3), p. 1 and in numerous newspapers, see Egea. 2017. In *The Apostle of Peace: A Survey of References to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Western Press 1871–1921*. Oxford: George Ronald, vol. 1 1871–1912, pp. 623–4, note 3.
- Egea, Amin. 2017. *The Apostle of Peace: A Survey of References to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Western Press 1871–1921*. Oxford: George Ronald, vol. 1: 1871–1912.
- Egea, Amin. 2018. *The Apostle of Peace: A Survey of References to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Western Press 1871–1921*. Oxford: George Ronald, vol. 2: 1912–1921.
- Emberson-Bain. 1998. Atu 'o Hakautapu. Country Briefing Paper: Women in Tonga, December. Available online: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/32602/women-tonga.pdf> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Erie, Matthew S. 2016. Symposium: The Legal Basis for Female Clerics among Chinese Muslims. Islamic Law Blog. Available online: <https://islamiclaw.blog/2016/09/02/the-legal-basis-of-female-clerics-among-chinese-muslims/> (accessed on 28 December 2022). (The First of Five Segments is in English, the Others Are In Chinese).
- Ethical Business Building the Future. 2022. Available online: <https://www.ebbf.org/> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- European Women's Lobby. n.d. Available online: <https://www.womenlobby.org/European-Parliament-50-50-Campaign?lang\T1\textquoterighten> (accessed on 16 February 2023).

- Ford, Mary Hanford. 1912. Abdul Baha, Head of New Religion, Coming Here. *Sun* 2. The article was also published as 'A Gentle Oriental Here', in the *Kansas City Star*, 27 Mar. 1912, p. 8b, col. 1. Ford included the same information in an article published years later as 'The Economic Teaching of Abdul Baha', in *Star of the West*, 21 March 1917 (8:1), pp. 1–7 and 11–16, though giving the wrong date for the meeting.
- Garis, Dalton. 2007. *Manna from Heaven: From Divine Speech to Economic Science*. Oxford: George Ronald.
- Global Policy Forum. 1996. ECOSOC Concludes NGO Review. November. Available online: <https://archive.globalpolicy.org/social-and-economic-policy/social-and-economic-policy-at-the-un/ngos-and-ecosoc/31786-ecosoc-concludes-ngo-review.html> (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- Gunia, Amy. 2022. A Women-Led Movement in Indonesia Says Interpreting Islam Isn't Just for Men. *Time*, December 9. Available online: <https://time.com/6239993/muslim-women-indonesia-leadership-ulama/> (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- Hatcher, John S. 1994. *The Arc of Ascent: The Purpose of Physical Reality II*. Oxford: George Ronald.
- Heller, Wendy. 1985. *Lidia*. Oxford: George Ronald.
- Hicks, Olivia. 2017. Race, Class, and the Demographics of the British Suffragette Movement. In *Bluestocking*. Oxford: BluestockingOxford, August 31, Available online: <https://blue-stocking.org.uk/2017/08/31/race-class-and-the-demographics-of-the-british-suffragette-movement> (accessed on 17 June 2022).
- Hoagg, Emogene. 1933. Short History of the International Bahá'í Bureau, at Geneva, Switzerland. In *The Bahá'í World 1930–1932*. New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, vol. 4.
- Holley, Horace. 1928. Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities in the East and West. In *The Bahá'í World, 1926–1928*. New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, vol. 2.
- Holley, Horace. 1952. International Survey of Current Bahá'í Activities in the East and West. In *The Bahá'í World 1946–1950*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, vol. 11, pp. 15–54.
- Hollinger, Richard, ed. 1992. *Community Histories: Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, vol. 6.
- House of Commons Library. 2022. Female Members of Parliament. December 5. Available online: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06652/> (accessed on 5 December 2022).
- Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. 2009. Advancing toward the Equality of Women and Men. December 8. Available online: [https://www.globalprosperity.org/media/documents/ISGP\\_Advancing\\_Toward\\_the\\_Equality\\_of\\_Women\\_and\\_Men.pdf](https://www.globalprosperity.org/media/documents/ISGP_Advancing_Toward_the_Equality_of_Women_and_Men.pdf) (accessed on 21 June 2022).
- International Environment Forum. 2022. Available online: <https://iefworld.org/> (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- Iran Press Watch. 2016. Baha'is Killed in Iran Since 1978. Available online: <http://iranpresswatch.org/killed-since-1978/> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Iran Press Watch. 2022. An Unbelievable Injustice: Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi Sentenced to a Second Decade in Prison in Iran. Available online: <http://iranpresswatch.org/post/23287/unbelievable-injustice-mahvash-sabet-fariba-kamalabadi-sentenced-second-decade-prison-iran/> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- IranWire. 2022a. Former Baha'í Leaders Arrested Again Alongside Others. Available online: <https://iranwire.com/en/bahais-of-iran/106195-mahvash-sabet-and-fariba-kamalabadi-former-bahai-leaders-arrested-again-alongside-others/> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- IranWire. 2022b. Iran Ousted from UN Women's Commission in "Historic" Vote. Available online: <https://iranwire.com/en/women/111310-iran-expected-to-be-ousted-from-un-womens-commission/> (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- Jasion, Jan Teofil. 2004. Táhírih on the Russian Stage. In *Táhírih in History: Perspectives on Qurratu'l-'Ayn from East and West*. Edited by Sabir Afaqi. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, pp. 231–8.
- Jewish Women's Archive. 2022. Timeline of Women in the Rabbinate. December. Available online: <https://jwa.org/rabbis/timeline> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Karlberg, Michael. 2022. The Pursuit of Social Justice. Available online: <https://bahaiworld.bahai.org/library/the-pursuit-of-social-justice/> (accessed on 6 October 2022).
- Kaur, Upinder Jit. 2022. Role and Status of Women in Sikhism. Gateway to Sikhism. Available online: <https://www.allaboutsikhs.com/sikh-literature/sikhism-articles/role-and-status-of-women-in-sikhism/> (accessed on 2 January 2022).
- Kaybryn, Jo, and Vijaya Nidadavolu. 2012. A Mapping of Faith-based Responses to Violence against Women and Girls in the Asia-Pacific Region. UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office. Available online: <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA-WVA-FBO-VAWG-AP-2012.pdf> (accessed on 19 December 2022).
- Keddie, Nikki R. 2006. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. London: Yale University Press.
- Khademi, Mona. 2022. *The Life of Laura Barney*. Oxford: George Ronald.
- Kumar, Radha. 1993. *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Lempinen, Miko. 1999. Consultative Relationship between the United Nations and Non-Governmental Organizations'. Åbo/Turku, Finland: Institute for Human Rights, Åbo Akademi University. June. Available online: <https://www.abo.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/1999-Lempinen-Consultative-relationship-between-the-UN-and-NGOs.pdf> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Ma'a Fafine mo e Famili. 2012. National Study on Domestic Violence against Women in Tonga 2009, Nofo 'A Kainga. June. Available online: <https://pacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/tonga-vaw-report-final-2012.pdf> (accessed on 19 December 2022).
- Maḥmúd-i-Zarqání. 1998. *Maḥmúd's Diary*. Oxford: George Ronald.

- Mayer, Claude-Hélène, and Michelle S. May. 2021. Women Leaders Transcending the Demands of COVID-19: A Positive Psychology 2.0 Perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology* 12: 647658. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- McGilligan, Janak Palta. 2012. *Barli Development Institute For Rural Women—An Alternative Model of Women's Empowerment in India*. Oxford: George Ronald. Available online: [https://www.grbooks.com/collections/available-on-kindle/products/barli-development-institute\\_palta-mcgilligan?variant\T1\textquoteright24468430913636](https://www.grbooks.com/collections/available-on-kindle/products/barli-development-institute_palta-mcgilligan?variant\T1\textquoteright24468430913636) (accessed on 10 October 2022).
- McNamara, Brendan. 2021. *The Reception of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Britain; East Comes West*. Leiden: Brill.
- McNamara, Brendan. 2022. Iran's Nod to International Human Rights Day Was more Repression of Its People. *The Journal*. Available online: <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/iran-2-5947081-Dec2022/> (accessed on 14 March 2023).
- Menashri, David. 2020. The Beginning of New Education in Nineteenth-Century Iran. *Irfan Nema* 5: 94–113.
- Mitchell, Glenford E. 2009. Administration, Bahá'í. Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project. Available online: [https://www.bahai-encyclopedia-project.org/index.php?view\T1\textquoterightarticle&catid\T1\textquoteright56%3Aa-selection-of-articles&id\T1\textquoteright67%3Aadministration&option\T1\textquoterightcom\\_content&Itemid\T1\textquoteright74](https://www.bahai-encyclopedia-project.org/index.php?view\T1\textquoterightarticle&catid\T1\textquoteright56%3Aa-selection-of-articles&id\T1\textquoteright67%3Aadministration&option\T1\textquoterightcom_content&Itemid\T1\textquoteright74) (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Momen, Moojan. 1997. Religious Studies Homepage, United Kingdom. March 10. Available online: <https://www.momen.org/relstud/uk.htm> (accessed on 17 June 2022).
- Momen, Moojan. 2005. The role of women in the Iranian Bahá'í community during the Qájár period. In *Religion and Society in Qajar Iran*. Edited by Robert Gleave. London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 346–69.
- Momen, Moojan. 2015. *Bahá'í Communities of Iran 1851–1921*. The North of Iran. Oxford: George Ronald, vol. 1.
- Momen, Moojan. 2021. *Bahá'í Communities of Iran 1851–1921*. The South of Iran. Oxford: George Ronald, vol. 2.
- Momen, Wendi. 1995. The Changing Role of Women in the Bahá'í Administration in the West: Preliminary Notes. Presented at the Gender Studies Conference, San Francisco, CA, USA, October 12–15; (English Speaking Europe). Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies.
- Momen, Wendi. 2018. The Articulation of the Equality and Rights of Women in Bahá'í Discourse and Implementation. In *Bahá'í Studies Review*. Bristol: Intellect, vol. 21, pp. 27–55. Available online: <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/intellect/bsr/2015/00000021/00000001/art00003> (accessed on 17 June 2022).
- Mueller, Mary Ann. 2022. Anglican Women Bishops: Who Are They? *VirtueonLine*, May 4. Available online: <https://virtueonline.org/anglican-women-bishops-who-are-they> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Nabil-i-A'zam. 1970. *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- National Board of Catholic Women of England and Wales. 2022. Women at the Periphery taking Centre Stage. Ushaw, Durham. November 26. Available online: <https://diocesehn.org.uk/news/conference-of-catholic-women-at-ushaw-durham/> (accessed on 2 January 2022).
- National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) of the Bahá'ís of the United States. 2002. Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence: A Supplement to Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities. Available online: [https://bahai-library.com/nsa\\_guidelines\\_domestic\\_violence](https://bahai-library.com/nsa_guidelines_domestic_violence) (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) of the Bahá'ís of the United States. 2003. Participant Handouts, Domestic Violence and the Bahá'í Community, An Assembly Development Module Workshop. Available online: [http://core-curriculum.bahai.us/downloads/Assembly\\_Development/2003\\_0403\\_oad\\_wkshpDV\\_Stu.pdf](http://core-curriculum.bahai.us/downloads/Assembly_Development/2003_0403_oad_wkshpDV_Stu.pdf) (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Nyhaugen, Line. 2021. Women in Mosques: Fixating on the Number of Female Imams Overlooks the Progress That Has Been Made. *The Conversation*. Available online: <https://theconversation.com/women-in-mosques-fixating-on-the-number-of-female-imams-overlooks-the-progress-that-has-been-made-155243> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- O'Shea, Ursula Jane. 2022. Women in the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers): The Relevance of Their Experience in Envisioning a Gender-Inclusive Church. pp. 263–76. Available online: <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/AASR/article/view/16817> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Osborn, Lil. 2014. *Religion and Relevance: The Bahá'ís in Britain, 1899–1930*. Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, vol. 24.
- Paine, Mabel, and Sylvia Paine. 1933. Glimpses of the New World Order, part V, Notes on a visit to Haifa and 'Akká. In *The Bahá'í Magazine*. Washington, DC: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, vol. 24.
- Pew Research Center. 2018. Views on Leadership Traits and Competencies and How They Intersect with Gender. September 20. Available online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/09/20/2-views-on-leadership-traits-and-competencies-and-how-they-intersect-with-gender> (accessed on 12 December 2022).
- Pullella, Philip. 2022. Pope Names Women to Bishops Advisory Committee for First Time. Reuters. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pope-names-women-bishops-advisory-committee-first-time-2022-07-13/> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Rabbání, Rúhíyyih. 1969. *The Priceless Pearl*. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Radio Free Europe. 2019. Iconic Iranian Antihijab Protester Jailed For One Year. Available online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/iconic-iranian-antihijab-protester-jailed-for-year/29879887.html> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Reuters. 2022. Iran Arrested Baha'i Citizens, Accuses Them of Israel Links-State Media. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-arrested-bahai-citizens-accuses-them-israel-links-state-media-2022-08-01/> (accessed on 27 December 2022).



- Rinaldo, Rachel. 2017. How a Growing Number of Muslim Women Clerics Are Challenging Traditional Narratives. The Conversation. Available online: <https://theconversation.com/how-a-growing-number-of-muslim-women-clerics-are-challenging-traditional-narratives-77932> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Rosenberg, Ethel. 1911a. *A Brief Account of the Bahai Movement*. London: Priory Press, Hampstead, and J. M. Watkins, St Martin's Lane (for the Bahai Society of London).
- Rosenberg, Ethel. 1911b. *Notes taken by Ethel Rosenberg in Paris*. London: United Kingdom Bahá'í Archives.
- Ruhi Institute. 2020. *Engaging in Social Action*. Book 13, Unit 2 'Elements of a Conceptual Framework'. Cali: Ruhi Institute, sec. 8. p. 7.
- Ruhi Institute. 2023. Statement of Purpose and Methods. Available online: <https://www.ruhi.org/en/statement-of-purpose-and-methods/> (accessed on 2 February 2023).
- Rutstein, Nathan. 1987. *Corinne True: Faithful Handmaid of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Oxford: George Ronald.
- Shahriari, Kamyab. 2017. 'Modernization Process in Iran: Historical Overview'. *Journal of Social Science Studies* 4: 1. [CrossRef]
- Shavar, Soli. 2009. *The Forgotten Schools: The Baha'is and Modern Education in Iran, 1899–1934*. London: I B Tauris.
- Shoghi Effendi. 1925. Letter to the Esteemed Members of the American National Spiritual Assembly. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/bahai-administration/6#872167287> (accessed on 11 November 2022).
- Shoghi Effendi. 1927. Letter to a Local Spiritual Assembly. *Bahá'í News*, June 18, p. 9.
- Shoghi Effendi. 1944. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the Louhelen School Youth Session. *Bahá'í News*, August 25.
- Shoghi Effendi. 1947a. Letter to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine. Available online: <https://www.bic.org/statements/letter-united-nations-special-committee-palestine> (accessed on 11 November 2022).
- Shoghi Effendi. 1947b. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual. In *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, 3rd ed. Compiled by Helen Hornby. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, no. 2073.
- Shoghi Effendi. 1968. *Bahá'í Administration*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/bahai-administration/1#993297352> (accessed on 11 November 2022).
- Shoghi Effendi. 1970. *Dawn of a New Day: Messages to India 1923–1957*. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Shoghi Effendi. 1971. *Messages to the Bahá'í World*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Shoghi Effendi. 1991. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Shoghi Effendi. 1995. *God Passes By*, rev. ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- Sikhs.org. 2011. Women in Sikhism. Available online: <https://www.sikhs.org/women.htm> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Singh, Nirmal. 2013. Women & Sikhs in Theology and Praxis: Introductory Perspective. *Sikh Social Thought, Practice & Issues*. October 4. Available online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344726425\\_WOMEN\\_SIKHS\\_IN\\_THEOLOGY\\_AND\\_PRAxis\\_INTRODUCTORY\\_PERSPECTIVE](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344726425_WOMEN_SIKHS_IN_THEOLOGY_AND_PRAxis_INTRODUCTORY_PERSPECTIVE) (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Smith, Phillip. 1992. Development and Influence of the Bahá'í Administrative Order in Great Britain, 1914–1950. In *Community Histories: Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*. Edited by Hollinger. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, vol. 6, pp. 153–215.
- Soltani, Anoosh. 2016. Confronting Prejudice Against Muslim Women in the West. United Nations University. Available online: <https://unu.edu/publications/articles/confronting-prejudice-against-muslim-women-in-the-west.htm> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Statista. 2022a. Number of Countries Where the de Facto Highest Position of Executive Power Was Held by a Woman from 1960 to 2022. Available online: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1058345/countries-with-women-highest-position-executive-power-since-1960/> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Statista. 2022b. Number of members of the House of Lords in the United Kingdom in 2022, by Gender and Party. Available online: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/877684/house-of-lords-members-by-gender/> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Stockman, Robert H. 1985. *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins, 1892–1900*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, vol. 1.
- Stockman, Robert H. 1995. *The Bahá'í Faith in America, Early Expansion, 1900–1912*. Oxford: George Ronald, vol. 2.
- Taefti, Vargha, and Nazila Ghanea. 2009. Dissident Watch: Fariba Kamalabadi. In *Middle East Quarterly*. p. 96. Available online: <https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/> (accessed on 19 March 2023).
- Tahirih Justice Center. 2023. Available online: <https://www.tahirih.org> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Thorne, Adam, Moojan Momen, Janet Fleming Rose, and Earl Redman. 2023. *Bahá'í History of Britain*. Oxford: George Ronald, forthcoming.
- Time. 2022a. Top Female Leaders around the World. Available online: <https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,2005455,00.html> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Time. 2022b. Heroes of the Year, The Women of Iran. *Time*, December 7, Cover and Article by Azadeh Moaveni, pp. 58–61.
- Tohidi, Nayereh. 2016. Women's Rights and Feminist Movements in Iran. *International Journal on Human Rights*. October, pp. 75–89. Available online: <https://sur.conectas.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/7-sur-24-ing-nayereh-tohidi.pdf> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles), Part I. 1919. Available online: [https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/treaty\\_of\\_versailles-112018.pdf](https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/treaty_of_versailles-112018.pdf) (accessed on 30 October 2022).
- UK Government GOV.UK. 2022. Iran Country Policy and Information Note: Women—Early and Forced Marriage, Iran. May, updated November. Available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/iran-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-women-early-and-forced-marriage-iran-May-2022-accessible> (accessed on 2 January 2023).

- UK Parliament. 2022. Women and the House of Lords. Available online: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/womenthelords/> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- UN News. 2022. Iran Removed from UN Commission on the Status of Women. Available online: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/12/1131722> (accessed on 15 December 2022).
- UN Women. 2022a. Facts and figures: Women's Leadership and Political Participation. Available online: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures> (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- UN Women. 2022b. Gender-Related Killings of Women and Girls: Improving Data to Improve Responses to Femicide/Feminicide. Available online: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/Gender-related-killings-of-women-and-girls-improving-data-to-improve-responses-to-femicide-feminicide-en.pdf> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- UN Women. 2023. Available online: <https://www.unwomen.org/en> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- UNAIDS. 2008. 2008 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic. Geneva. Available online: [https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/jc1510\\_2008globalreport\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/jc1510_2008globalreport_en_0.pdf) (accessed on 12 January 2023).
- UNICEF. 2022. Child Marriage. June. Geneva. Available online: <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage> (accessed on 14 October 2022).
- United Methodist Church. 2022. Timeline of Women in Methodism. Available online: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/timeline-of-women-in-methodism> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- United Nations. 1945. *The United Nations Charter*. Available online: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text> (accessed on 18 October 2022).
- United Nations. 1948a. Index to Proceedings of the Economic and Social Council. p. 202. Available online: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2020/06/e1948.pdf> (accessed on 18 October 2022).
- United Nations. 1948b. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. December 10. Available online: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (accessed on 18 October 2022).
- United Nations. 1979. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights. December 18. Available online: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women> (accessed on 18 October 2022).
- United Nations. 1995. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. Available online: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/> (accessed on 6 October 2022).
- United Nations. 2000. Millennium Declaration, United Nations General Assembly. September 18. Available online: [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_55\\_2.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_55_2.pdf) (accessed on 12 January 2023).
- United Nations. 2012a. Final Draft of the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Submitted by the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona. July 18. Available online: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/732765?ln=T1\textquoteright#record-files-collapse-header> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- United Nations. 2012b. The Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. September. Available online: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-poverty/guiding-principles-extreme-poverty-and-human-rights> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- United Nations. 2012c. The Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. September. Available online: [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/OHCHR\\_ExtremePovertyandHumanRights\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/OHCHR_ExtremePovertyandHumanRights_EN.pdf) (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- United Nations. 2022a. 'About Us: Member States. December. Available online: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us#:~:text=T1\textquoterightMember-States,the%20current%20193%20Member%20States> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- United Nations. 2022b. United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, 'Ms. Nazila Ghanea'. Available online: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/ms-nazila-ghanea> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. 2017. Mahvash Sabet—The Baha'i Seven. Available online: <https://www.uscifr.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/released-rpocs/mahvash-sabet-bahai-seven> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1972. Constitution of the Universal House of Justice. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/documents/the-universal-house-of-justice/constitution-universal-house-justice> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1977. To All National Spiritual Assemblies (Cable). Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/search?q=T1\textquoterightdecade%20for%20women> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1981. Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Italy. In *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, 3rd ed. Compiled by Helen Hornby. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, no. 105.
- Universal House of Justice. 1985. To the Peoples of the World (The Promise of World Peace). October. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/documents/the-universal-house-of-justice/promise-world-peace> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1987. Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. Unpublished work.
- Universal House of Justice. 1988a. To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand, no. 52. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 28 December 2022).

- Universal House of Justice. 1988b. To the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada; para. 55:11. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1991a. To the Pacific Women's Conference (30 May–June 1991), paras. 110.1–3. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 11 November 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1991b. To the Bahá'í International Women's Conference in Ile-Ife, Nigeria (para. 116.1). Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 11 November 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1992. To all National Spiritual Assemblies. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 11 November 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1993. Letter Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an Individual. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19930124\\_001/1#739050776](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19930124_001/1#739050776) (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1995a. Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. Available online: [https://bahai-library.com/pdf/compilations/cultural\\_diversity.pdf](https://bahai-library.com/pdf/compilations/cultural_diversity.pdf) (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1995b. To an Individual. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19950519\\_001/1#113992922](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19950519_001/1#113992922) (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 1996a. To the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 153. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19960421\\_001/1#045175659](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19960421_001/1#045175659) (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Universal House of Justice. 1996b. Supplementary Message to the Indian Subcontinent and Region, Ridván 153, paras. 218.10–11. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Universal House of Justice. 1996c. Ridván 153. Supplementary Message to Southeast Asia, para. 219.4. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Universal House of Justice. 1996d. Supplementary Message to Africa, Ridván 153, para. 222.14. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Universal House of Justice. 1996e. Supplementary Message to Pakistan, in Western and Central Asia, Ridván 153, para. 223.7. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Universal House of Justice. 1999. To a National Spiritual Assembly, no. 307. Available online: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/muhj-1986-2001/muhj-1986-2001.pdf?0b5ac118> (accessed on 7 November 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 2000a. To the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20000421\\_001/1#968697952](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20000421_001/1#968697952) (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 2000b. Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an Individual. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20000718\\_001/1#556121686](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20000718_001/1#556121686) (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 2002. To the World's Religious Leaders. April. Available online: [www.bahai.org/r/369933420](http://www.bahai.org/r/369933420) (accessed on 11 November 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 2005. To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20051227\\_001/1#527522699](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20051227_001/1#527522699) (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 2008. To the believers in the Cradle of the Faith. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20080620\\_001/1#576388820](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20080620_001/1#576388820) (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Universal House of Justice. 2012. To all National Spiritual Assemblies. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20121126\\_001/1#716186515](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20121126_001/1#716186515) (accessed on 15 January 2023).
- Universal House of Justice. 2013. To the Bahá'ís of Iran. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20130302\\_001/1#063389421](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20130302_001/1#063389421) (accessed on 15 January 2023).
- Universal House of Justice. 2021a. To the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20210420\\_001/1#750707520](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20210420_001/1#750707520) (accessed on 15 January 2023).
- Universal House of Justice. 2021b. To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. Available online: [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230\\_001/1#758524470](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20211230_001/1#758524470) (accessed on 15 January 2023).
- Vahman, Fereyduun. 2019. *175 Years of Persecution: A History of the Babis & Baha'is of Iran*. London: Oneworld.

- Vanuatu Daily Post. 2018. Teoumaville Peace Conference: Education of Girls as a Road to Peace. Available online: [https://www.dailypost.vu/news/teoumaville-peace-conference-education-of-girls-as-a-road-to-peace/article\\_6ccf9823-d765-5f72-8293-a30da2827ec3.html](https://www.dailypost.vu/news/teoumaville-peace-conference-education-of-girls-as-a-road-to-peace/article_6ccf9823-d765-5f72-8293-a30da2827ec3.html) (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- Vogel, Andre. 2018. "The Source of Change Within Society": A Brief Survey of Modern Iranian Women's Movements. *Undergraduate Journal of Global Citizenship* 2: 2. Available online: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/jogc/vol2/iss4/2> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
- Warde, Shirley. 1952. Julia Culver. In *The Bahá'í World 1946–1950*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, vol. 11, pp. 507–9.
- WEDO Primer 50/50 Campaign. n.d. Available online: [https://wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/firststep\\_primer.htm](https://wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/firststep_primer.htm) (accessed on 16 February 2023).
- Weinberg, Robert. 1995. *Ethel Jenner Rosenberg: The Life and Times of England's Outstanding Bahá'í Pioneer Worker*. Oxford: George Ronald.
- Weinberg, Robert. 2019. Tales of Magnificent Heroism: The Impact of the Báb and His Followers on Writers and Artists. *The Bahá'í World (Online)*. Available online: <https://bahaiworld.bahai.org/library/tales-of-magnificent-heroism/20190> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Whitmore, Bruce W. 1984. *The Dawning Place*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.
- WLUML (Women Living Under Muslim Laws). 2022. Vida Movahedi. Available online: <https://www.wluml.org/profile/vidamovahedi/> (accessed on 27 December 2022).
- Women's Ordination Worldwide. 2020a. Florence Li Tim-Oi. Available online: [http://womensordinationcampaign.org/blog-working-for-womens-equality-and-ordination-in-the-catholic-church/2020/1/25/rev-florence-li-tim-oi-first-woman-ordained-in-anglican-communion#:~:text=T1\textquoterightFlorence%20Li%20Tim%2DOi%20\(5,25%20January%201944%20in%20Macau](http://womensordinationcampaign.org/blog-working-for-womens-equality-and-ordination-in-the-catholic-church/2020/1/25/rev-florence-li-tim-oi-first-woman-ordained-in-anglican-communion#:~:text=T1\textquoterightFlorence%20Li%20Tim%2DOi%20(5,25%20January%201944%20in%20Macau) (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Women's Ordination Worldwide. 2020b. Timeline. Available online: <https://womensordinationcampaign.org/timeline-of-work-for-catholic-womens-ordinationwomens-ordination-worldwide> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- Women's Ordination Worldwide. 2022. Available online: <https://womensordinationcampaign.org/> (accessed on 16 December 2022).
- World Economic Forum. 2022. Global Gender Gap Report 2022. Available online: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/in-full/1-benchmarking-gender-gaps-2022> (accessed on 11 November 2022).
- World Health Organization (WHO). 2021. Violence against Women. Available online: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women#:~:text=T1\textquoterightEstimates%20published%20by%20WHO%20indicate,viole%20is%20intimate%20partner%20violence> (accessed on 2 January 2023).
- World Population Review. 2022. Available online: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-female-leaders> (accessed on 28 December 2022).
- Zacharias, Anna. 2019. Special report: Meet the female imams of Muslim China. *The National*. Available online: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/special-report-meet-the-female-imams-of-muslim-china-1.808330> (accessed on 28 December 2022).

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.