

Women and the House of Justice

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Contents

Contents.....	1
Overview.....	1
Man/Woman used for Quality rather than Gender	1
Men on the Houses of Justice.....	1
Men on the Universal House.....	2
Women Have the Qualities to Lead.....	5
Women Will Participate in All Areas.....	6
International Bahá'í Council.....	6
Men only being temporary due to Society	7
Gender of the House up to the Electors	8
Commentary endorsed by the House	8

Overview

This document quotes those passages in the Bahá'í Writings which touch upon whether women are expected to serve on the House of Justice.

There are various social arguments for and against the idea; on the one hand, identity of service is a nice thing, on the other hand, the nature of the masculine mind ensures the international scene on this planet and its problems are and always will be heavily male-dominated, in which case it makes sense to have a male-orientated House to interact with it. In short, you can find good ideas either way.

Over all, it can be seen that although there is some ambiguous language or intent in some passages, the Bahá'í Writings do very much appear to call for a male-orientated House, and the House's own summary which you can find at the end, finds this same natural conclusion.

Man/Woman used for Quality rather than Gender

These quotes are viewed by some as diminishing the force of the word "man" as a designation for gender, promoting rather its use as a general quality designation.

Bab

Selections from the Writings of the Bab - Maid of Heaven

O People of the earth! By the righteousness of the One true God, **I am the Maid of Heaven** begotten by the Spirit of Baha.

Bahá'u'lláh

Gleanings CXXIX - Maid of Heaven

I am the Maid of Heaven, the Offspring begotten by the Spirit of Baha. My habitation is the Mansion of His Name, the All-Glorious. Before the Concourse on high I was adorned with the ornament of His

names. I was wrapt within the veil of an inviolable security, and lay hidden from the eyes of men.

Payam-i Malakut, p. 231

Today the maidservants of God are accounted as men (*Imruz ama'u'llah az rijal mahsub*).

Yazdani, Maqam va Huquq-i Zan, p. 12

Verily, in the eyes of Baha **women are the same as men**. All are God's creation, which He created in his image and likeness, that is, they are manifestations of His names and attributes (*Inna an-nisa'a 'inda 'l-Baha'i hukmuhunna hukmu 'r-rijal. Fa 'l-kullu khalqun li'llahi, khalaqahum 'ala suratihi wa mithalihi ay mazahiru asma'ih wa sifatih*).

Payam-i Malakut, p. 232

O maidservants: Rise for the Cause of the Truth in a masculine way. How many are the women who are mentioned by God in this day as men, while some men are considered women (*Ay kanizan: Mardanih bar amr-i haqq qiyam nima'id. Basi az nisa' kih al-yawm 'ind Allah az rijal madhkur va ba'di-yi rijal kih az nisa' mahsub*).

Abdu'l-Bahá

Yazdani, Maqam va Huquq-i Zan, pp. 13-14

In this most great cycle and this century of the preexistent King, **human limitations have been lifted and the laws of the worlds of being have been abrogated and annulled. Masculinity and femininity do not depend upon beards, moustaches, athletic strength, and wielding maces. [Masculinity] depends on courage, power, knowledge, steadfastness, uprightness, passion and attraction. How many mistresses of the bridal chamber have been sent forth and how many men have been consigned to headscarves and meekness** (*Dar in kawr-i a'zam va qarn-i malik-i qidam, hududat-i bashar murtafa' va ahkam-i 'avalim-i kawn mansukh va munfasakh ast. Dhakuriyyat va anathiyyat va mardanigi va farzanigi bilihiyih va sablat va yal va kupal nabudih. Bi himmat va qudrat va ma'rifat va thibat va istaqamat va ishti'al va injidhab budih. Chih bisyar-i rabbat-i hijal mab'uth shudand va basa mardan kih dar taht-i miqna'ih va havan mahshur shudand*).

Men on the Houses of Justice

These quotes are used to say that as "men" are designated for the Houses of Justice (plural) this must include the National and Local Houses, and as women were originally barred from them but have now been allowed onto them, the same logic may apply to the International House.

Baha'u'llah

Tablet on Universal Language

Parliaments and **men of Baha'i houses of justice** ("majalis" and "rijal-i buyut-i 'adliyyih").

Ishraq-Khavari, ed., Ganji Shayigan, p. 211

"This irrevocable decree was revealed from the realm of the Ancient of Days for the people of the world generally, and for the people of assemblies specifically. For the implementation of revealed commands, laws, and ordinances hath in the book been delegated to the **men of the houses of justice.**" (*In amr-i mubram az jabarut-i qidam az bara-yi ahl-i 'alam 'umuman va ahl-i majalis khususan nazil shudih. Chih kih ijra-yi avamir va ahkam va hududat-i munzalih dar kitab bih rijal-i buyut-i 'adliyyih-i ilahiyyih tafvid. shudih.*)

Men on the Universal House

These passages are used in confirmation of the restriction of the International House of Justice to men only.

It also includes passages that helps discriminate Houses of Justice from Community Gatherings ("Assemblies").

Baha'u'llah

Aqdas 52

We have decreed that a third part of all fines shall go to the Seat of Justice, and We admonish **its men** to observe pure justice, that they may expend what is thus accumulated for such purposes as have been enjoined upon them by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. **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.

Ali Kuli Khan 1906 'Akka Pilgrim Notes

These notes were taken in Persian, of which the most important (and this must surely have been one of them) were submitted for correction.

In speaking of the infallibility of the House of Justice in a way that can refer only to the Universal House, these notes say:-

Being asked as to the sex of its membership, 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered: "**The membership of the House of Justice shall all be men.**"

1902 Feb 25 Corinne True to Abdu'l-Bahá

(International Baha'i Archives Document No. 11137)

...There has existed a difference of opinion in our Assembly [that is, the Chicago Baha'i community] as to how it should be governed. Every believer desires to carry out the Commands of the Blessed Perfection [Baha'u'llah] but we want to know from our Lord himself [that is, 'Abdu'l-Baha] what these Commands are, as they are written in Arabic and we do not know Arabic. Will Our Lord write me direct from Acca and not have it go through any Interpreter [sic] in America and thus grant me the Authority to say the Master says thus & so, for he has written it to me... **Many in our Assembly feel that the Governing Board [Local Spiritual Assembly, then male] in Chicago should be a mixed Board of both men & women.** Woman in America stands so conspicuously for all that is highest & best in every department and for that reason it is contended the affairs should be in the hands of both sexes...

1902 Letter to Corinne True

(as an answer to her specific request that women be elected to the Chicago House of Spirituality)

(Translated in Selections from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, number 38, and Stockman, Baha'i Faith in America vol. 2, p. 75)

...Know thou, O handmaid, that in the sight of Baha, 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. Whosoever draweth nearer to God, that one is the most favoured, whether man or woman. How many a handmaid, ardent and devoted, hath, within the sheltering shade of Baha, proved superior to the men, and surpassed the famous of the earth.

The House of Justice [in Chicago if adhering to her question; or International if expanding her question or deriving a precedent], **however, according to the explicit [unchallengeable, or in contrast to implicit?] 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.**

As to you, O ye other handmaids who are enamoured of the heavenly fragrances, arrange ye holy gatherings, and found ye Spiritual Assemblies [general community gatherings], for these are the basis for spreading the sweet savours of God, exalting His Word, uplifting the lamp of His grace, promulgating His religion and promoting His Teachings, and what bounty is there greater than this? These Spiritual Assemblies are aided by the Spirit of God. Their defender is Abdu'l-Baha. Over them He spreadeth His wings. What bounty is there

greater than this? These Spiritual Assemblies are shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions. What bounty is there greater than this?

1909 Letter to Corinne True

This letter was understood by the Chicago Assembly to be limiting their Assembly to male-only. However, the form of the argument taken that way would tend to lend itself to making all Assemblies high and low male-only rather than just the International one, which Abdu'l-Bahá's action shortly after clearly shows wasn't the intent. Or it could simply mean that through context, the logic/purpose of the Aqdas was in scope here and therefore appropriate to quote as evidence. A suggestion would be that umami simply means the most general one a Bahá'í may turn to at any given time, which at the time was Chicago, and later, the International House.

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** [umumi : = Public, General, **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 must be men.** However, in all other bodies [as this does not include the Local House of Justice, the above Public House is capable of being referenced to the Chicago House of Justice rather than the International One], such as the Temple Construction Committee, the Teaching Committee, the Spiritual Assembly [not the Local House; notice how it is placed second], and in charitable and scientific associations, women share equally in all rights with men. (Stockman, Baha'i Faith in America, vol. 2, p. 323).

[Original translation that was received; note how this one from Syria interprets differently.]

Through His Honor Mrza Ahmad Ameen Fareed to the maid-servant of God, Mrs. True.

(Upon her be Baha'o'llah!) HE IS GOD!

O daughter of the Kingdom!

The epistle was received and the Convention of the delegates of the Mashrek-el-Azkar on the day of Naurooz, at Chicago; proved a cause of joy and gladness. In reality, a wonderful coincidence has taken place. In that blessed day Abdul Baha hastened to Haifa and with the divine friends was present at the Supreme Station (The Tomb of the

Bab). The pure body of His Holiness, the Supreme (The Bab), after sixty years of homeless wandering and placelessness, was established on Mt. Carmel, the mountain of the Lord, in the Supreme Station, and in Chicago there was held (at the same time) the Convention of the delegates of the Mashrek-el-Azkar and Mr. Charles Haney and Mrs. Miriam Haney arrived in Chicago and were present in that holy meeting.

I beg of God that that radiant Assembly may become aided in pure, truthful intentions and confirmed in the service of the Kingdom, so that it may be a sample of the Assemblages of the Supreme Concourse.

The Persian philosopher has said: "That which is above has its likeness below."

As to the land, you must carry out the agreement you made with the land owner, so that it may be purchased. But payment by payment, it should be done, and, if possible, commence the building of the Mashrek-el-Azkar. Delay not.

In the law of God, **men and women are equal in all rights save in the Universal House of Justice; for the Chairman and the 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 the building of the Mashrek-el-Azkar, the Assembly of Teaching, the Spiritual Assembly, Philanthropic Associations Scientific Association, men and women are co-partners in all the rights.

Upon thee be Baha-el-ABHA!

(signed) Abdul Baha Abbas

Translated by Dr. Ameen U. Fareed Haifa, Syria, July 29, 1909

1910 Letter to Shanaz R. Waite

O THOU DAUGHTER OF THE KINGDOM!

Thy letter was considered on account of the lack of time a brief answer is given.

The Spiritual Assemblies which are organized for the sake of teaching the Truth whether Assemblies for men, Assemblies for women or mixed Assemblies are all accepted and are conducive to the spreading of the Fragrance of God. This is essential. Likewise the public meetings in which one day during the week the believers gather to be engaged in the commemoration of God, to read communes, and deliver effective speeches is acceptable and beloved.

But now it is utterly impossible to establish the House of Justice which is mentioned in the Book of Aqdas. Nay rather it is impracticable and not to be thought of. That is for the time when the Cause is

proclaimed and the commands of God have become effective. Therefore, **now is not the time for the House of Justice which must be established by general election.** [Of Chicago or the World?] Its mention is not permissible and its realization impossible.

Endeavor ye as much as possible that differences may not arise in the affairs. Let not every insignificant matter become the cause of disagreement. If such conditions exist the end will be complete dispersion.

The believers and the maid servants of the Merciful must all consider how to produce harmony, so that the unity of the human world may be realized - not that every wholly unimportant subject become conducive to differences of opinion. It is my hope that the friends and maid servants of America become united on all subjects and not disagree at all. If they agree upon a subject even though it be wrong it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce demolition of the Divine foundation. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong - as it is unity - the truth will be revealed and wrong made right.

Upon thee be BAHÁ-EL-ABHÁ

Translated by Mirza Shorab, Washington D.C. April 20th 1910

Received on the first day of the Temple Unity Convention on April 22nd 1910

1912 Action in Star of the West, no. 9, vol. 3 (August 20, 1912):16

On Saturday evening, August 10, the Baha'is of Chicago became the guests of Abdul-Baha at a feast held in his name and through his love and bounty, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. George Lesch . . . **On Sunday evening, the 11th, the Chicago Assembly selected a "Spiritual Meeting" of nine,** composed of men and women, whose service - according to the wish of 'Abdu'l-Bahá - is, first, to promulgate the teaching of the Revelation, and, second, to attend to other matters necessary to the welfare of the assembly [i.e. community].

1913 Letter of 'Abdu'l-Baha 28 August 1913 (in Paris Talks, p. 183)

As I have not ample time at my disposal, I will give herein a brief, conclusive and comprehensive answer. It is as follows:

In this Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the women 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. Rest ye assured. Do ye not look upon the present conditions; in the not far distant future the world of women will become all-refulgent and all-glorious, For His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh Hath Willed It so! 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.

But there are certain matters, the participation in which is not worthy of women. For example, at the time when the community is taking up vigorous defensive measures against the attack of foes, the women are exempt from military engagements. It may so happen that at a given time warlike and savage tribes may furiously attack the body politic with the intention of carrying on a wholesale slaughter of its members; under such a circumstance defence is necessary, but it is the duty of men to organize and execute such defensive measures and not the women--because their hearts are tender and they cannot endure the sight of the horror of carnage, even if it is for the sake of defence. From such and similar undertakings the women are exempt.

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!' [This is after the Chicago Assembly has allowed women on, and in a context of what's just been stated and what follows that can only refer to the Universal House.]

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. When the women attain to the ultimate degree of progress, then, according to the exigency of the time and place and their great capacity, they shall obtain extraordinary privileges. Be ye confident on these accounts. His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh has greatly strengthened the cause of women, and the rights and privileges of women is one of the greatest principles of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Rest ye assured! Ere long the days shall come when the men addressing the women, shall say: 'Blessed are ye! Blessed are ye! Verily ye are worthy of every gift. Verily ye deserve to adorn your heads with the crown of everlasting glory, because in sciences and arts, in virtues and perfections ye shall become equal to man, and as regards tenderness of heart and the abundance of mercy and sympathy ye are superior'.

Shoghi Effendi's Secretaries

(These four letters are from Shoghi Effendi's Secretaries, and quote the 1902 Corinne True letter with the potential argument that it was without awareness that it was written in reply to questions about a Chicago Local Assembly rather than the International House of Justice, with the idea that letters of Shoghi's Secretaries are less authoritative than those of Shoghi Effendi himself, and that letters to individual believers should not be allowed to determine general policy, since any intended general policy was always communicated by the general channels of communication.)

28 July 1936 to an individual believer [As quoted from one source] {As quoted in Directives}

As regards your question concerning the membership of the Universal House of Justice; there is a Tablet from 'Abdu'l Baha in which he definitely states that the membership of the Universal House [of Justice] is confined to men, and that the wisdom of it will be fully revealed [and appreciated] in the future. In the local, as well as the National Houses of Justice, however, women have the full right of membership. It is, therefore, only to the International House of Justice that they cannot be elected. {The Baha'is should accept this statement of the Master in a spirit of deep faith, confident that there is a divine guidance and wisdom behind it, which will be gradually unfolded to the eyes of the world.}

27 May 1940

The membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men. Fixing the number of the members, the procedures for election and the term of membership will be known later, as these are not explicitly revealed in the Holy Text.

14 December 1940

to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma

As regards the membership of the International House of Justice, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states in a Tablet that it is confined to men, and that the wisdom of it will be revealed as manifest as the sun in the future. In any case the believers should know that, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself has explicitly stated that sexes are equal except in some cases, the exclusion of women from the International House of Justice should not be surprising. From the fact that there is no equality of functions between the sexes one should not, however, infer that either sex is inherently superior or inferior to the other, or that they are unequal in their rights.

Quoted In Directives

Regarding your question, the Master said the wisdom of having no women on the International House of Justice, would become manifest in the future. We have no other indication than this.

At present there are women on the International Council, and this will continue as long as it exists, but when the International House of Justice is elected, there will only be men on it, as this is the law of the Aqdas.

Universal House of Justice

Constitution

The Universal House of Justice shall consist of nine men who have been elected from the Baha'i community in the manner hereinafter provided.

Women Have the Qualities to Lead

These quotes are used to demonstrate that women may take all the same highest positions and qualities as men may.

Baha'u'llah

Tablets of Baha'u'llah revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 185 (Female Manifestations)

Know thou moreover that in the Day of Revelation were He to pronounce one of the leaves [female believers] to be the manifestation of all His excellent titles, unto no one is given the right to utter why or wherefore, and should one do so he would be regarded as a disbeliever in God and be numbered with such as have repudiated His Truth.

Surih of the Temple, Summons of the Lord of Hosts - Maid of Heaven

While engulfed in tribulations I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice, calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden - the embodiment of the remembrance of the name of My Lord - suspended in the air before Me. So rejoiced was she in her very soul, that her countenance shone with the ornament of the good-pleasure of God, and her cheeks glowed with the brightness of the All-Merciful. Betwixt earth and heaven she was raising a call which captivated the hearts and minds of men. She was imparting to both My inward and outer being tidings which rejoiced My soul, and the souls of God's honored servants. Pointing her finger unto My head, she addressed all who are in heaven and all who are on earth, saying:

"By God! This is the Best-Beloved of the worlds, and yet ye comprehend not. This is the Beauty of God amongst you, and the power of His sovereignty

within you, could ye but understand. This is the Mystery of God and His Treasure, the Cause of God and His glory unto all who are in the kingdoms of Revelation and of creation, if ye be of them that perceive."

Women Will Participate in All Areas

That the inferior position of women is just educational in nature.

Promulgation of Universal Peace (Page 283)

[Need to check if this is an authenticated one or not.]

Briefly, history furnishes evidence that during the past centuries there have been great women as well as great men; but in general, owing to lack of educational advantages, women have been restricted and deprived of opportunity to become fully qualified and representative of humankind. When given the opportunity for acquiring education, they have shown equal capacity with men. Some philosophers and writers have considered woman naturally and by creation inferior to man, claiming as a proof that the brain of man is larger and heavier than that of woman. This is frail and faulty evidence, inasmuch as small brains are often found coupled with superior intellect and large brains possessed by those who are ignorant, even imbecilic. The truth is that God has endowed all humankind with intelligence and perception and has confirmed all as His servants and children; therefore, in the plan and estimate of God there is no distinction between male or female. The soul that manifests pure deeds and spiritual graces is most precious in His sight and nearer to Him in its attainments. The realities of things have been revealed in this radiant century, and that which is true must come to the surface. Among these realities is the principle of the equality of man and woman - equal rights and prerogatives in all things appertaining to humanity. Baha'u'llah declared this reality over fifty years ago. But while this principle of equality is true, it is likewise true that woman must prove her capacity and aptitude, must show forth the evidences of equality. She must become proficient in the arts and sciences and prove by her accomplishments that her abilities and powers have merely been latent... in this century of radiance Baha'u'llah has proclaimed the reality of the oneness of the world of humanity and announced that all nations, peoples and races are one. He has shown that although individuals may differ in development and capacity, they are essentially and intrinsically equal as human beings, just as the waves of the sea are innumerable and different, but the reality of the sea is one. The

plurality of humanity may be likened to the waves, but the reality of humankind is like the sea itself. All the waves are of the same water; all are waves of one ocean. Therefore, strive to show in the human world that women are most capable and efficient, that their hearts are more tender and susceptible than the hearts of men, that they are more philanthropic and responsive toward the needy and suffering, that they are inflexibly opposed to war and are lovers of peace. Strive that the ideal of international peace may become realized through the efforts of womankind, for man is more inclined to war than woman, and a real evidence of woman's superiority will be her service and efficiency in the establishment of universal peace.

Some Answered Questions, Section 45

...the Universal House of Justice, if it be established under the necessary conditions - **with members elected from all the people** [this could be taken to include women] - that House of Justice will be under the protection and the unerring guidance of God.

International Bahá'í Council

Here the train of thought is that since the International Bahá'í Council included women, and the Council was the embryonic Universal House of Justice, it follows the Universal House should also include women. But of course, see above ("Quoted in Directives") where Shoghi Effendi excludes this explicitly.

Shoghi Effendi

1951 January 9 Cablegram - Formation of First International Baha'i Council (which included women)

Proclaim National Assemblies of East and West weighty epoch-making decision of formation of first International Baha'i Council, forerunner of supreme administrative institution destined to emerge in fullness of time within precincts beneath shadow of World Spiritual Center of Faith already established in twin cities of Akka and Haifa. Fulfillment of prophecies uttered by Founder of Faith and Center of His Covenant culminating in establishment of Jewish State, signaling birth after lapse of two thousand years of an independent nation in the Holy Land, the swift unfoldment of historic undertaking associated with construction of superstructure of the Bab's Sepulcher on Mount Carmel, the present adequate maturity of nine vigorously functioning national administrative institutions throughout Baha'i World, combine to induce me to arrive at this historic decision marking most significant milestone in evolution of Administrative Order of the Faith of Baha'u'llah in

course of last thirty years. Nascent Institution now created is invested with threefold function: first, to forge link with authorities of newly emerged State; second, to assist me to discharge responsibilities involved in erection of mighty superstructure of the Bab's Holy Shrine; third, to conduct negotiations related to matters of personal status with civil authorities. To these will be added further functions in course of evolution of this first embryonic International Institution, marking its development into officially recognized Baha'i Court, its transformation into duly elected body, its efflorescence into Universal House of Justice, and its final fruition through erection of manifold auxiliary institutions constituting the World Administrative Center destined to arise and function and remain permanently established in close neighborhood of Twin Holy Shrines. Hail with thankful, joyous heart at long last the constitution of International Council which history will acclaim as the greatest event shedding luster upon second epoch of Formative Age of Baha'i Dispensation potentially unsurpassed by any enterprise undertaken since inception of Administrative Order of Faith on morrow of Abdu'l-Baha's Ascension, ranking second only to glorious immortal events associated with Ministries of the Three Central Figures of Faith in course of First Age of most glorious Dispensation of the five thousand century Baha'i Cycle. Advise publicize announcement through Public Relations Committee. -Shoghi

This sounds in essence to some ears, given the extraordinary hyperbole used, like the establishment of the Universal House of Justice - hence its eight members (the Guardian making a permanent ninth) as outlined that the Universal House would be. In particular, it included women.

1953 May 4 - Messages To The Bahá'í World 1950-1957

...The International Baha'i Council, comprising eight members, charged with assisting in the manifold activities attendant upon the rise of the World Administrative Center of the Faith, which must pave the way for the formation of a Baha'i International Court and the eventual emergence of the Universal House of Justice, the supreme legislative body of the future Baha'i Commonwealth, has been established, enlarged, and the functions of its members defined...

Important Commentators

Priceless Pearl

"...In its functions the International Baha'i Council acted as that Secretariat the Guardian, so many years earlier, had desired to establish; its members

received their instructions from him individually, in the informal atmosphere of the dinners at the Pilgrim House table, and not formally as a body; its meetings were infrequent as all its members were kept constantly busy with the many tasks allotted to them by the Guardian himself. Skilfully Shoghi Effendi used this new institution to create in the minds of government and city officials the image of a body of an international character handling the administrative affairs at World Centre. It was no concern of the public how much or how little that body had authority; we who were on it knew Shoghi Effendi was everything; the public, however, began to see an image which could evolve later into the Universal House of Justice." [29-5]

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh by Adib Taherzadeh

In his writings Shoghi Effendi attached great importance to the International Council, which was to evolve by stages into the Universal House of Justice. The first stage was the Council in its initial form as an appointed body. The second stage was its becoming an elected body. This took place in 1961, during the Custodianship of the Hands of the Cause, when the National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world elected a nine-member Council. The third stage was for the Council to be transformed into the International Baha'i Court^[1] in Israel, and the fourth stage was to be the election and the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. The third stage did not materialize because when the Hands of the Cause, after the passing of Shoghi Effendi, investigated the matter through legal channels they found that the prerogatives and privileges which could legally be granted to a Baha'i Court were inadequate or unbefitting the prestige of the Faith. The International Council continued its service until 1963 when it ceased to exist with the election of the Universal House of Justice.

Men only being temporary due to Society

These quotes suggest the emphasis of male-only Houses of Justice being an arrangement due to social conditions that is temporary .

1954 April Cablegram - Messages to the Baha'i World 1950-1957

(Until 1954 Persian Assemblies were men-only.)

Full rights have been accorded to Baha'i women residing in the cradle of the Faith, to participate in the membership of both national and local Baha'i Spiritual Assemblies, removing thereby the last remaining obstacle to the enjoyment of complete equality of rights in the conduct of the

administrative affairs of the Persian Baha'i community

Gender of the House up to the Electors

Shoghi Effendi

Dispensation of Baha'u'llah, chapter on 'The Administrative Order'

He is debarred from laying down independently the constitution that must govern the organized activities of his fellow-members, and from exercising his influence in a manner that would encroach upon the liberty of those whose sacred right is to elect the body of his collaborators.

Commentary endorsed by the House

Letters

Regarding membership on the Universal House of Justice being restricted to men, you are correct in your understanding that Baha'u'llah was explicit about the matter, and consequently it is not within the power of the House of Justice to rule otherwise at this time or at any time in the future. As to the additional information on this matter which "has limited distribution" mentioned in the statement posted on the discussion group, it is unclear what this statement is referring to. In 1988, the attention of the House of Justice was drawn by the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand to an unpublished paper which was being widely circulated on this subject; the comments of the House of Justice on the subject were conveyed in a letter to the National Assembly of New Zealand, a copy of which is enclosed for your reference...

1988-05-31 To New Zealand National Assembly

WOMEN AND THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of New Zealand

May 31, 1988

We have been informed of a paper, presented at a recent New Zealand Baha'i Studies conference, which raises the possibility that the ineligibility of women for membership on the Universal House of Justice may be a temporary provision subject to change through a process of progressive unfoldment of the divine purpose. We present the following points as a means of increasing the friends' understanding of this established provision of the Order of Baha'u'llah that membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men.

The system of Baha'i Administration is "indissolubly bound with the essential verities of the Faith" as set

forth in the writings of Baha'u'llah and Abdul' Baha. A unique feature of this system is the appointment of authorized interpreters, in the persons of Abdul' Baha and the Guardian, to provide authoritative statements on the intent of Baha'u'llah's revelation. Writing in The Dispensation of Baha'u'llah, Shoghi Effendi stated that "Abdul' Baha and the Guardian " share... the right and obligation to interpret the Baha'i Teachings". In relation to his own function as interpreter, he further stated that "the Guardian has been specifically endowed with such power as he may need to reveal the purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Baha'u'llah and of Abdul' Baha". The significance of this important provision is that the religion of God is safeguarded and protected against schism and its essential unity is preserved.

The function of the divinely appointed interpreters is evident in the progressive disclosure and clarification of the details of the Baha'i teachings concerning the membership of the Universal House of Justice. Baha'u'llah, in his writings, ordained both the Universal House of Justice and Local Houses of Justice. However, in many of his laws he refers simply to "the House of Justice" and its members as "Men of Justice", leaving open for later clarification to which level or levels of the whole institution each law would apply. Abdul' Baha, the Center of Baha'u'llah's covenant and the unerring interpreter of his word, not only provided for the establishment of National Spiritual Assemblies, to be designated at some future time as Secondary Houses of Justice, but He also outlined the means by which the Universal House of Justice was to be elected. In His will and testament, the Master wrote:

"And now, concerning the House of Justice which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error, it must be elected by universal suffrage, that is, by the believers... By this House is meant the Universal House of Justice, that is, in all countries a secondary House of Justice must be instituted and these secondary Houses of Justice must elect the members of the Universal one... (p. 14)

And in one of His Tablets He had already written:

At whatever time the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme House of Justice.

In the following passage, 'Abdu'l Baha referred to membership on the "House of Justice" being restricted to men, without a specific designation of

the level or levels of the institution to which this provision applied:

"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. (Selections from the writings of Abdu'l Baha (rev. ed) Haifa: Baha'i World Center, 1982), p. 80)

Later the Master clarified that it was only the Universal House of Justice whose membership was confined to men. Abdu'l Baha wrote:

"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. (from a newly translated tablet).

Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, provided the following authoritative elaboration on this theme:

"As regards your question concerning the membership of the Universal House of Justice; there is a Tablet from 'Abdu'l Baha in which he definitely states that the membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men, and that the wisdom of it will be fully revealed and appreciated in the future. In the local, as well as the National Houses of Justice, however, women have the full right of membership. It is, therefore, only to the International House of Justice that they cannot be elected..." (28 July 1936)

'Abdu'l Baha Himself, it should be noted, had, as attested by the above-cited extracts from His Tablets, affirmed that the ineligibility of women for election to the Universal House of Justice had been set out "in the text of the Book" and "in the explicit text of the Law of God". In other words, this provision was established by none other than Baha'u'llah Himself.

Further, in response to a number of questions about eligibility for membership and procedures for election of the Universal House of Justice, the Guardian's secretary writing on his behalf distinguished between those questions which could be answered by reference to the "explicitly revealed" Text and those which could not be. Membership to the Universal House of Justice fits into the former category. The letter stated:

"The membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men. Fixing the number of the members, the procedures for election and the term of membership will be known later, as these are not explicitly revealed in the Holy Text." (27 May 1940)

Hence, 'Abdu'l Baha and the Guardian progressively have revealed, in accordance with divine inspiration, the meaning and implications of Baha'u'llah's seminal teachings. Their interpretations are fundamental statements of truth which cannot be varied through legislation by the Universal House of Justice.

The progressive clarification of the details of the laws concerning membership of the Houses of Justice has been accompanied by a gradual implementation of their provisions. For example, based on the texts available to the believers at the time, membership of local Houses of Justice was initially confined to men. When the Master began to elaborate on the difference between the levels of this Institution, He clarified that the exclusion of women applied only to the Universal House of Justice. Thereafter, women became eligible for service as members of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. Women in the West, who already enjoyed the benefits of education and opportunities for social involvement, participated in this form of service much sooner than, for instance, their Baha'i sisters in Iran who were accorded this right only in 1954, "removing thereby the last remaining obstacle to the enjoyment of complete equality of rights in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Persian Baha'i Community". It is important to note that the timing of the introduction of the provisions called for by the interpretations of 'Abdu'l Baha and the Guardian in relation to the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, rather than constituting a response to some external condition or pressure, was dictated by the principle of progressive implementation of the laws, as enjoined by Baha'u'llah Himself. Concerning the implementation of the laws, Baha'u'llah wrote in one of His Tablets:

"Indeed the laws of God are like unto the ocean and the children of men as fish, did they but know it. However, in observing them one must exercise wisdom... One must guide mankind to the ocean of true understanding in a spirit of love and tolerance."

As mentioned earlier, the law regarding the membership of the Universal House of Justice is embedded in the Text and has been merely restated by the divinely appointed interpreters. It is therefore neither amenable to change nor subject

to speculation about some possible future condition.

With regard to the status of women, the important point for Baha'is to remember is that in the face of the categorical pronouncements in Baha'i Scripture establishing the equality of men and women, the ineligibility of women for membership on 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 Center 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.

Though at the present time, it may be difficult for the believers to appreciate the reason for the circumscription of membership on the Universal House of Justice to men, we call upon the friends to remain assured by the Master's promise that clarity of understanding will be achieved in due course. The friends, both women and men, must accept this with faith that the Covenant of Baha'u'llah will aid them and the institutions of His World Order to see the realization of every principle ordained by His unerring Pen, including the equality of men and women, as expounded in the Writings of the Cause.

The Universal House of Justice

1997-03-30 Translation of Umumi

M E M O R A N D U M

To: The Universal House of Justice Date: 30 March 1997

From: Research Department

Translation of "'Umumi" in Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

In an email message to the Universal House of Justice dated 23 March 1997, a question has been raised concerning translation. In an undated Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Baha addressed to Mrs. True (first translated into English by Dr. Ameen Farid in July 1909) the following statement has been revealed.

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. (Revised translation from the Persian, authorized 1987)

In the above Tablet, for the title "The Universal House of Justice" the Persian words used are: "Baytu'l-'Adl-i-'Umumi". The question has been asked, whether the translation of the word "'Umumi", as "Universal", could be a mistake, since the word has the connotation of "public" or "general" in addition to its meaning as "universal". Thus, following such an argument, the reference in the above text could perhaps be not to the "Universal House of Justice" but to the Local Spiritual Assembly of Chicago.

The word "'umumi" as an adjective qualifying the title of the institution of the "House of Justice" appears three times in the Persian text of 'Abdu'l-Baha's Will and Testament.¹ Shoghi Effendi's translation of this adjective is invariably "Universal" with a capital "U". The passages from the Will and Testament are as follows:²

The sacred and youthful branch, the guardian of the Cause of God as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abha Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness, the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God (page 11).

and now, concerning the House of Justice which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error, it must be elected by universal suffrage, that is, by the believers. Its members must be manifestations of the fear of God and daysprings of knowledge and understanding, must be steadfast in God's faith and the well-wishers of all mankind. By this House is meant the Universal House of Justice, that is, in all countries a secondary House of Justice must be instituted, and these secondary Houses of Justice must elect the members of the Universal one. Unto this body all things must be referred (page 14).

¹ See "Alvah-i-Vasayay-i-Mubarakiy-i-Hadrat-i-'Abdu'l-Baha" (Cairo: Mirza Abu'l-Qasim Gulistani-Shirazi, 1924-25), pages 12, 15, and 21.

² See "Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Baha" Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1971), pages 11, 14, and 19-20. Translation of "'Umumi" in Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Baha 30 March 1997

Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant. By this House is meant that Universal House of Justice which is to be elected from all countries, that is from those parts in the East and West where the loved ones are to be found, after the manner of the customary elections in Western countries such as those of England (pages 19-20).

There is no doubt whatsoever that by the term "Baytu'l-'Adl-i-'Umumi", in the above-mentioned Tablet, the institution intended, whose membership is to be of men only, is none other than "The Universal House of Justice" and not the Local Spiritual Assembly of Chicago.