

Preface

This book is about a belief system that stands unique in the field of religion, in the magnitude of its commitment to the advancement of women. The Bahá'í Faith aims to create unity between the diverse elements of humankind. Essential to the attainment of that all-embracing unity is the Bahá'í principle of the equality of the sexes. The implementation of this principle is revolutionizing relationships among peoples. It has implications for relationships within marriage and in the family, in the workplace, in the educational curriculum, and in all aspects of social and professional life.

In little more than 150 years, the Bahá'í Faith has become established in all parts of the planet. It is now recognized as the second most widely spread religion in the world. Under the leadership of the women and men serving on 180 Bahá'í National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world, notable progress has been made in achieving recognition of the equality of the sexes within diverse cultural settings.

Those committed to the advancement of women regard organized religion as a formidable obstacle to the attainment of their goal. Far too often, over the span of recorded history, religious practice has been marked by the subjugation of women,

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their relegation to an inferior position, and the denial of their human rights. It is little wonder that the quest for the equality of women and men has so often given rise to conflict with traditional religious authority. In recent years, movements emerging within the major faiths with the avowed aim of the emancipation of women have found their progress severely hampered by the weight of the historical record and by the theology of discrimination that has become an integral part of orthodox belief.

Yet it is undeniable that religion reaches to the roots of motivation and inspiration. It has a potential beyond that of any other force in human life to effect a fundamental change in deeply entrenched values and to create a community in which new values are expressed in action. Thus the power of religion, focused on the advancement of women, is capable of achieving a degree of success far beyond that accessible through social or political movements or through appeal to economic or philosophic arguments.

Advancement of Women provides a detailed treatment of the aims, actions, and accomplishments of the worldwide Bahá'í community in its pursuit of the vast task before it—that of dismantling the barriers to the liberation of women and of creating a dynamic and supportive community of men and women united in their commitment to the worthy ideal of the equality of the sexes. The book illustrates the crucial role the equality principle plays in achieving unity and freedom for both women and men at all levels of society. It describes work in progress, with much already accomplished at a foundational level, but with much more yet to be done.

The book may be divided into three parts. Chapters 1–4 explore in some detail the meaning of equality of the sexes and its relationship to the principles and practices of the major world religions. Among the issues discussed here are the practical implications of equality for the marriage relationship, for family

life and the education of children, and for the civic and professional involvement of women in all aspects of society. Chapter 4 examines, from a Bahá'í perspective, devotional life at an individual and communal level, including the participation of women in the administrative institutions of the religion.

The second part, chapters 5 and 6, presents the historical record of the actions of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Faith, and of the successive Heads of the Bahá'í community subsequent to His passing in 1892, to foster the expression of the principle of equality in a community that originated in the Middle East, spread initially to Europe and North America, and was then established all over the world.

The final part, chapter 7, deals with practical courses of action open to those who are committed to the Bahá'í approach for promoting the advancement of women. Success requires the involvement of both women and men. The Bahá'í Faith advocates a unified and mutually supportive endeavor by both sexes, far removed from the adversarial relationship which all too often arises in the struggle for equality.

The book is written with the aim of sharing information and innovative strategies with all who seek to foster universal recognition of the equality of women and men and who yearn for the full participation of women in all aspects of life. It provides a record of the measures undertaken by a religion committed unequivocally to the principle of equality. Beyond that, it offers insight into the magnitude of the attitudinal and social changes required for the expression of this principle on an enduring basis. Although the work of promoting equality between women and men is far from complete, its ultimate success is assured.