# Submission by the Australian Bahá'í Community to the Inquiry into Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Finance and Public Administration References Committee Inquiry into domestic violence and gender inequality. We commend the Committee for initiating this Inquiry, because we believe gender inequality is a key underlying cause of the epidemic of violence against women taking place in Australia and worldwide.

The Australian Bahá'í Community was established in 1920 and its membership reflects the diversity of modern Australia. As members of the Bahá'í Faith—a worldwide religion, founded over 170 years ago, with more than five million members around the globe—we work to promote and apply principles derived from Bahá'í teachings which contribute to thinking about current challenges facing humanity. Our efforts are focussed on the development of a peaceful, just and sustainable civilisation, in which the human rights of all individuals are upheld, and all are empowered to recognise and develop their capacities and to channel their collective energies towards service to humanity and the betterment of their communities.

The oneness and equality of all people is a foundational teaching of our faith. Peace in the world and the advancement of civilisation depend upon the realisation, in practice, of this universal spiritual truth. For almost a century, Australian Bahá'ís have been striving to make gender equality a reality in our families, our institutions and our community. We recognise that true equality is not easily attained, and that we need to persevere in our efforts to transcend cultural norms that impede the progress of women. Yet we hope the experience we have gained may prove beneficial to others.

This submission primarily addresses item (a) in the Inquiry's terms of reference: the role of gender inequality in all spheres of life in contributing to the prevalence of domestic violence. It also touches on item (b) ii: the role of gender stereotypes in contributing to cultural conditions which support domestic violence, including, but not limited to, messages conveyed to children and young people in education; and item (c): the role of government initiatives at every level in addressing the underlying causes of domestic violence.

**Introduction**

Women and girls in states and territories throughout Australia are enmeshed in a culture which enables and sustains violence against them. This affects not only women and girls; such violence is ultimately an act of aggression against society as a whole. It degrades victims, perpetrators, families and entire communities. The eradication of violence requires not only changes in law and policy, but more fundamental changes at the level of culture, attitudes and beliefs. Such changes must be grounded in the conviction that the equality of women and men is not only a goal to be achieved, but a truth about human nature to be acknowledged and embraced. The soul has no gender. The very essence of what make us human is neither 'male' nor 'female.' Conceived in this way, equality goes beyond a tally of resources or a set of social norms. It reflects the nobility inherent in every human being.

Viewed in the broader context, violence and discrimination against women and girls is one of the symptoms of a social order characterised by inequality, conflict, injustice and insecurity. Its structures and processes—constrained by particularistic agendas—prove themselves incapable of serving the common good. As we seek to eradicate violence against women and girls, we must not lose sight of the broader, long-term goal: namely the creation of conditions in which women *and* men can work shoulder to shoulder in constructing a more just and equitable social order.

Prevention begins by identifying and addressing the underlying causes of the violence rather than its symptoms. We take this opportunity to applaud the heightened attention and resources that have been given to this issue in Australia in recent years, including through the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children. We note that the second National Action Plan includes "Driving whole of community action to prevent violence" as its first national priority.

Efforts aimed at prevention must consider the prevailing conceptions of gender identity and of power, and the forms of discrimination and disadvantage that place women and girls at risk of violence. Prevention involves the deliberate adoption of gender-specific measures to ensure that an adequate proportion of resources is allocated towards the provision of accessible social services and law enforcement. Such efforts must be reinforced by clear definitions of violence, as well as comprehensive data collection methods in order to evaluate national efforts in this area, and to raise awareness among men and women of the gravity and prevalence of violence occurring in their community.

**Empowerment and Redefining Power**

Empowerment is a process of recognition, capacity building and action. Individuals become empowered as they come to recognise their inherent worth, the fundamental equality of all human beings, and their ability to improve their own condition and that of the wider society. At the collective level, empowerment involves the transformation of relationships of violence into relationships of equality and mutuality.

Beyond advocating for a balance of power, the very conception of power needs to be seriously questioned and fundamentally redefined. Prevailing notions of power tend to focus on the ability to compete effectively, to dominate, and to gain ascendancy over others. These essentially adversarial expressions of power do not provide society with the tools needed to create institutions and processes that foster the progress of all members of the community. We need a broader appreciation of the sources of power available to humanity, such as power that comes from the bonds of solidarity and mutual concern, the power that emanates from unity of thought and action, and the promotion of such qualities as justice, honesty and integrity.

**Education of Children and Youth**

Children's inherent spiritual qualities such as justice, cooperation and respect must be nurtured from a young age, both within the family and through educational programs. As they learn to practice these qualities, children should be guided to form patterns of conduct that help them to live in harmony with others.

In the experience of the Bahá'í Community, special attention should be given to the education of those aged 12 to 15 years, who are leaving behind childhood and undergoing profound change, both morally and intellectually. At this pivotal age, young people are beginning to develop a sense of personal moral responsibility and decision making, are refining their critical thinking skills, and are eager to explore the many issues to which their consciences are slowly awakening. In Australia our children and youth are demonstrating the ability to think deeply about the world around them. As they navigate this critical period in their lives, they must be given the tools to recognise the moral issues underlying the choices they make. This stage of development presents an important opportunity to help young people not only to develop a positive identity but also to elevate their thinking and to

adopt an outward-looking orientation, which inspires them to work towards the betterment of their communities. For boys, efforts in this direction should provide, among other things, the tools to develop the moral courage to take on new roles and responsibilities, especially those traditionally associated with the contributions of girls; for girls, such efforts should provide the tools to discover and to begin to develop their broad-ranging capacities in all arenas of human endeavour.

**Family and Community**

Moral capabilities can be taught in schools, but will not be effective unless they take root in family and community. To a large extent it is the family environment in which children grow and form views about themselves, the world and the purpose of life. To the degree that a family fails to meet the fundamental needs of the children, to that same degree will society be burdened with the consequences of neglect and abuse and will suffer greatly from the resulting conditions of apathy and violence.

At the level of the individual, realisation of human rights will require a fundamental rethinking in the way that boys are socialised to become men and how this socialisation is carried over into family, community and public life. Differential child-rearing strategies, parental expectations as well as the abusive treatment of female family members have long perpetuated males' sense of privilege and superiority. Furthermore, they have contributed to narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity, the devaluation of the contributions made by women, and to the perpetuation of patterns of dominance. In the family, the child learns about the nature of power and its expression in interpersonal relationships; it is here that she first learns to accept or reject authoritarian rule and violence as a means of expression and conflict resolution.

Moreover, what children learn in the family is either confirmed or contradicted by the social interactions and values that shape their community life. All adults in the community – neighbours, educators, health workers, entrepreneurs, political representatives, religious leaders, police officers, media professionals and the like – share a responsibility for modelling equal relations between women and men.

**Men and Boys**

The full development of men and boys is inextricably linked to the advancement of women. A society characterised by gender equality serves the interests of both sexes. It enables men and women to develop in a more balanced and multifaceted way, to discard the rigid role stereotypes so crucial to shifting family dynamics, and to accord women full access to the world of work. It also enables the replacement of unequal relationships and tendencies toward domination and aggression with genuine partnerships between the sexes characterised by collaboration and the sharing of resources and decision-making.

The role of men in addressing violence against women is particularly important. Men and boys must be encouraged to speak out strongly against violence and exploitation and not to protect perpetrators. They must make a conscious effort to understand fully the principle of the equality of women and men and its expression in both private and public life. We recognised and applaud efforts made in Australia to engage men and boys in this issue, for example the White Ribbon initiative. At home, men must come to understand their role in modelling healthy relations and respect for male and female members of the family. It is often in the home that boys and girls first learn about the nature of power and how it is expressed. Distorted expressions of power and authority promote in children attitudes and habits that are carried to the workplace, to the community, and to public life.

**The Role of Religion**

Voices raised in the name of religion have constituted one of the most formidable obstacles to eradicating violent and exploitative behaviours perpetrated against women and girls. We believe the

time has come for religious leaders to support unequivocally, and become the standard bearers of, the principle of the equality of women and men. In particular, no custom, tradition, or religious interpretation that sanctions any form of violence against women and girls should be allowed to outweigh the obligation to eradicate such violence. The regrettable practice of hiding behind cultural and religious traditions that permit violence against women perpetuates a climate of legal and moral impunity.  The responsibility to protect women and girls from violence must take precedence over any such customs. Religious practices and doctrines in flagrant violation of international human rights standards must be subject to deeper examination and scrutiny, bearing in mind that all religions contain the voices of women. Too often, due to ignorance, lack of education or lack of opportunity to be heard, the views of women have been absent from the evolving definition of what religion is and how its teachings bear on public and private life.

Policy makers have sometimes been resistant to addressing the cultural and religious dimensions of attitudes governing the treatment of women – perhaps fearing the potentially divisive nature of such an undertaking or lacking knowledge about whom to address and how to proceed. Yet the achievement of gender equality has been painstakingly slow precisely because questions about the roles and responsibilities of women challenge some of the most deeply entrenched human attitudes.

Religions have traditionally played a defining role in cultivating the values of a community. Religious organisations also constitute some of the oldest, far-reaching networks in the world. The majority of Australians continue to profess a religious commitment, and our religious landscape is increasingly diverse. Given the tremendous weight of religion and culture in shaping perceptions about the role of women in society, religious organisations and constituencies must be meaningfully engaged in efforts to further the gender equality agenda.

**Conclusion**

The human rights of women and girls will never be fully realised without societal transformation. Such transformation involves changes at the level of attitudes, culture, community life, as well as in the structures that sustain and normalise violence and exploitation. Framed differently, the challenge now is how to create the social, material and structural conditions in our nation in which women and girls can develop to their full potential.

From the Bahá'í perspective, the essence of any program of social change is the understanding that the individual has a spiritual or moral dimension. This shapes their understanding of their life's purpose, their responsibilities towards the family, the community and the world. Alongside critical changes in the legal, political and economic architecture slowly taking shape, the development of individuals' moral and spiritual capabilities is an essential element in the as yet elusive quest to fully realise the human rights of women and girls in our country.

The idea of promoting specific morals or values may be a controversial one; too often in the past such efforts have been associated with repressive religious practices, oppressive political ideologies and narrowly defined visions of the common good. However, moral capabilities, when articulated in a manner consistent with the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and aimed at fostering the spiritual, social and intellectual development of all persons, represent a key element of the kind of transformation required for a non-violent society to take shape. Moreover, such capabilities must be anchored in the central social and spiritual principle of our time, namely the interdependence and interconnectedness of humanity as a whole.

There can be no doubt that, in this day, the equality of men and women is attainable and urgently needed. While the Australian Government has committed to the promotion of an equal partnership between men and women in family, community and public life, individuals continue to struggle against entrenched patterns of dominance and violence that characterise much of human interaction. Each of the issues identified in this submission is a piece of a greater puzzle. Ultimately, it is imperative to address violence against women in a manner that recognises 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, the efforts of agencies and institutions may prove ineffective or unsustainable. The ultimate aim is not only to enable women to participate fully in the affairs of society within the present social order. Rather, women must be enabled to work shoulder to shoulder with men to construct a new social order characterised by justice, peace and collective prosperity.

The Australian Bahá'í Community thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. We look forward to the outcomes of its deliberations.

Australian Bahá'í Community
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