

The Heart of Resilience

**The Climate Crisis
as a Catalyst for a
Culture of Equality**

A statement of the Baha'i International Community
to the 66th session of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women

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In a world where the impending risks of climate change press daily, a twofold reality presents itself—while women are disproportionately affected by climate change, they are uniquely situated to lead efforts in response. In the wake of climate-induced disaster, livelihoods directly dependent on stable and healthy ecosystems—often largely pursued by women—are upended. Many lose access to land, shelter, as well as financial support or recourse. Vulnerabilities deepen where societies already fall short of realizing the full potentialities of women. Yet, women are not simply victims. Their insights form the range of human experience and enable the construction of a fuller picture of reality. Often connected to large networks, women are an integral element of communal flourishing, community-based solutions, and mobilization. Whether as leaders in economic thinking, policymakers, climate activists, smallholder farmers, or through a multitude of other capacities, women worldwide are making significant contributions related to climate action, natural

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resource management, food security, and scientific innovation toward sustainable solutions. Young and old alike, the experiences of women offer profound insight into safeguarding humankind's home, the present generation, and those still to come. Ensuring the potential of women is fully harnessed will require action on at least two fronts: increasing women's presence in leadership roles and creating conditions for women to engage more meaningfully in community life.

Amidst mounting climate risks, it is becoming clearer how much humanity benefits when women's leadership is embraced and promoted at every level of society, whether in the family, community, local government, corporation, or nation. Qualities of leadership typically associated with the masculine—assertiveness and competitiveness, for example—have proven limited when not tempered by those typically associated with the feminine, such as an inclination toward collaboration and inclusion, and a disposition toward care and selflessness. The tendency to prioritize longer-term interests, to consider the well-being of future generations, and to explore the human impact of policies more broadly are increasingly acknowledged as necessary tools in formulating environmentally conscious programs and strategies for building more resilient communities. Of course, these attributes can be manifested by leaders irrespective of sex. Yet, by increasing women's participation in leadership roles, these qualities more consistently inform the culture of leadership and characterize practical strategies.

Creating opportunities for women's participation at various levels of governance as well as in diverse community roles would prove critical in ensuring their experiences increasingly inform decisions of import. Yet, for meaningful engagement to fully find expression,

a commitment to the principle of gender equality will need to be intentionally woven into the processes of governance themselves, and institutional systems will need to be reconfigured to give rise to just relationships. Possibilities will need to be ensured for women's active involvement in shaping decision-making spaces. Recognition that a multiplicity of perspectives is a prerequisite for effective investigation into the challenges of society will need to characterize every deliberative setting. This would form part of the work of transforming spaces historically dominated by men into inclusive environments where all feel empowered to engage, and where men, motivated by a spirit of understanding, learn to genuinely consult and act in concert with women. As each comes to be valued for their distinct contributions to the collective, foundations of trust, so critical to the resilience of any community, can crystallize among individuals, but also in institutions that are committed to the well-being of all. Establishing more mature relationships within systems of governance, then, becomes both a process and outcome in developing policies capable of responding to the impacts of climate change.

For there to be lasting transformation, a whole-of-society dedication to gender equality and a commitment to building a public life shaped by women and men in dynamic partnership in every facet of life will need to take root. At the global level, international policies—guided by principles of justice, equity, and dignity—will be indispensable in setting the stage for a culture of equality, as will be the creation of global institutions tasked with systematizing insights gained through local experience. The work of advancing gender equality must, then, also proceed in the local context as much as the

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international. In Dili, Timor-Leste, for instance, efforts to weave a unified pattern of community life six months prior to a devastating cyclone contributed to the community's resilience. "In that short time we've learned much about how to serve together as one. Every day we act and reflect, and then plan for the next day," a member of that community noted. This collaborative mode, shifting away from pre-conceived notions of progress, helped develop the skills and networks needed to form relief structures capable of distributing food and other essentials. Without expectation for remuneration, they supported more than 7,000 people across 13 villages and neighborhoods when access to external assistance had been cut off. In Okcheay, Cambodia, youth engaging in moral and spiritual programs empowering them to serve society collectively devised a local tree-planting project, which subsequently protected a section of their roads from soil erosion with the onset of severe floods a year later. These efforts, though simple, offer glimpses into ways in which cultivating inclusive and cohesive communities can contribute not only to the will to endure and survive, but also to live in the highest sense of the word.

The community, a building block of the global arena, can provide a space where alternative, inclusive, and cooperative ways of life can find expression, where men wholeheartedly come to see women as equal partners, and all are empowered to develop leadership abilities. Built from the ground up, new patterns of community life become situated within a larger global enterprise as communities learning to apply the principle of gender equality in all circumstances, for the betterment of all, contribute to a growing body of knowledge at the international level. Such a process can take a variety of forms. For its part, the worldwide Bahá'í community, together

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with other collaborators, has been learning about the application of spiritual principles to the life of the community in breaking down prejudicial barriers to women's participation. Through moral educational programs, attitudes of unity and fellowship are instilled from a young age so that participants come to view each other as valued allies working for the well-being of their communities. Central to this process is the concept of capacity-building—of enhancing the ability of participants to better understand the material, social, and spiritual realities of their societies and to devise next steps as they collectively chart their own path of progress, deriving fulfillment through service. Toward this end, spaces have organically emerged for individuals to reflect together on their challenges, identify constructive responses, and explore deeper questions related to the meaning of life. These spaces can serve as arenas where hope in times of difficulty finds expression, and bonds of solidarity can strengthen. The above-mentioned examples demonstrate that the capacities, attitudes, and qualities characterizing a community can reinforce its resilience in the face of extreme events or ongoing environmental burdens.

The United Nations is uniquely positioned to demonstrate what such a culture of equality could look like at the international level, through, for instance, creating open deliberative spaces among its agencies, harmonizing its diverse processes related to gender equality and inclusivity, and learning how its internal structure could increasingly reflect these principles. The UN will also no doubt prove critical in shaping international

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policy frameworks and encouraging funding in support of initiatives that foster a greater appreciation for the imperative of gender equality. And it could facilitate the sharing of knowledge created by actors at each level. In this regard, important considerations such as how institutional and societal arrangements can be reconfigured to enable women's meaningful participation, as well as how cohesive societies can be forged even before the onset of catastrophe, could be revisited periodically in international spaces such as this Commission.

The world's condition is pointing to the universal truth that humanity's collective experiences are shared and that effective responses require the full spectrum of perspectives to be represented at every level of governance. Examples are beginning to emerge where more mature expressions of community life and institutional arrangements

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have enabled women to lead as effective protagonists in the face of local hardships and global disasters. It is precisely in times of turbulence where profound opportunities exist to redefine collective values and the assumptions that underlie them. The challenges posed by climate change should serve as catalysts to embrace new approaches to inclusive forms of governance as well as just patterns of community life capable of unlocking the whole range of human experience.

Bahá'í International Community

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866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 120

New York, NY 10017, USA

www.bic.org

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