

# Talk at Franklin Square House

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Original English



95

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26 August 1912

Boston, Massachusetts

Notes by Edna McKinney

Among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the principle of equality of man and woman. Bahá'u'lláh has said that both belong to humankind and that in the estimation of God they are equal, for each is the complement of the other in the divine creative plan. The only distinction between them in the sight of God is the purity and righteousness of their deeds and actions, for that one is preferred by God who is most nearly in the spiritual image and likeness of the Creator. Throughout the kingdoms of living organisms there is sex differentiation in function, but no preference or distinction is made in favor of either male or female. In the animal kingdom individual sex exists, but rights are equal and without distinction. Likewise, in the plane or kingdom of the vegetable sex appears, but equality of function and right is evident. In as much as sex distinction and preference are not observed in these kingdoms of inferior intelligence, is it befitting the superior station of man that he should make such differentiation and estimate, when as a matter of fact there is no difference indicated in the law of creation?

In ancient times and medieval ages woman was completely subordinated to man. The cause of this estimate of her inferiority was her lack of education. A woman's life and intellect were limited to the household. Glimpses of this may be found even in the Epistles of Saint Paul. In later centuries the scope and opportunities of a woman's life broadened and increased. Her mind unfolded and developed; her perceptions awakened and deepened. The question concerning her was: Why should a woman be left mentally undeveloped? Science is praiseworthy — whether investigated by the



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intellect of man or woman. So, little by little, woman advanced, giving increasing evidence of equal capabilities with man — whether in scientific research, political ability or any other sphere of human activity. The conclusion is evident that woman has been outdistanced through lack of education and intellectual facilities. If given the same educational opportunities or course of study, she would develop the same capacity and abilities.

There are some who declare that woman is not naturally endowed or imbued with the same capabilities as man; that she is intellectually inferior to man, weaker in willpower and lacking his courage. This theory is completely contradicted by history and facts of record. Certain women of superlative capacity and determination have appeared in the world, peers of man in intellect and equally courageous. Zenobia was the wife of the governor-general of Athens. Her husband died, and like the Russian Queen, Catherine, she manifested the highest degree of capability in the administration of public affairs. The Roman government appointed her to succeed her husband. Afterward she conquered Syria, conducted a successful campaign in Egypt and established a memorable sovereignty. Rome sent an army against her under direction of distinguished commanders. When the two forces met in battle, Zenobia arrayed herself in gorgeous apparel, placed the crown of her kingdom upon her head and rode forth at the head of her army, defeating the Roman legions so completely that they were not able to reorganize. The Emperor of Rome himself took command of the next army of one hundred thousand soldiers and marched into Syria. At that time Rome was at the zenith of greatness[pg 282] and was the strongest military power in the world. Zenobia withdrew with her forces to Palmyra and fortified it to withstand a siege. After two years the Roman Emperor cut off her supplies, and she was forced to surrender.

The Romans returned in triumphal procession and pageant to their own country. They entered Rome in great pomp and splendor, led by African elephants. After the elephants there were lions, then tigers, bears and monkeys, and after the monkeys, Zenobia — barefooted, walking, a chain of gold about her neck and a crown in her hand, dignified, majestic, queenly and courageous notwithstanding her downfall and defeat.

Among other noted women of history was Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, who held her kingdom against the armies of Rome for a long time. Catherine, wife of Peter the Great, displayed courage and military strategy of the very highest order during the war between Russia and Muḥammad Páshá. When the cause of Russia seemed hopeless, she took her jewels and went before the Turkish victor, presented them to him and pled the justice of her country's cause with such convincing skill and diplomacy that peace was declared.

Victoria, Queen of England, was really superior to all the kings of Europe in ability, justness and equitable administration. During her long and brilliant reign the British Empire was immensely extended and enriched, due to her political sagacity, skill and foresight.

The history of religion, likewise, furnishes eloquent examples of woman's capability under conditions of great difficulty and necessity. The conquest of the Holy Land by the Israelites after forty years' wandering in the desert and wilderness of Judea was accomplished through the strategy and cunning of a woman.

After the martyrdom of Christ, to Whom be glory, the disciples were greatly disturbed and disheartened. Even Peter had denied Christ and tried to shun Him. It was a woman, Mary Magdalene, who confirmed the wavering disciples in their faith, saying, "Was it the body of Christ or the reality of Christ that ye have seen crucified? Surely it was His body. His reality is everlasting and eternal; it hath neither beginning nor ending. Therefore, why are ye perplexed and discouraged? Christ always spoke of His being crucified." Mary Magdalene was a mere villager, a peasant woman; yet she became the means of consolation and confirmation to the disciples of Christ.

In the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh there have been women who were superior to men in illumination, intellect, divine virtues and devotion to God. Among them was Qurratu'l-'Ayn. When she spoke, she was listened to reverently by the most learned men. They were most respectful in her presence, and none dared to contradict her. Among the Bahá'í women in Persia today there are Rúḥu'lláh and others who are gifted with knowledge, invincible steadfastness, courage, virtue and power of will. They are superior to men and well-known throughout Persia.

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. Bahá'u'lláh 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. Demonstrations of force, such as are now taking place in England, are neither becoming nor effective in the cause of womanhood and equality. Woman must especially devote her energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences, seeking to assist mankind in that which is most needful. By this means she will demonstrate capability and ensure recognition of equality in the social and economic equation. Undoubtedly God will confirm her in her efforts and endeavors, for in this century of radiance Bahá'u'lláh 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.

