

ABUSE: Understanding Abuse

Forty years ago, the Guardian predicted that a time would come when “The perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions, (would) reveal themselves . . . in their worst and most revolting aspects” and when “the voice of human conscience is stilled, the sense of decency and shame (would be) obscured.”^[1] “Among the signs of moral downfall in the declining social order are the high incidence of violence within the family, the increase in degrading and cruel treatment of spouses and children, and the spread of sexual abuse.”^[2]

Abuse and violence are ugly. We don't want to think it exists in our world, so we create world visions for ourselves where it doesn't. We deliberately look the other way when we see it happening. When it happens to us, we find excuses to make it acceptable, to justify the fact that we put up with it. When we see it on TV, we laugh. When we hear it in the lyrics of songs on the radio, we tell ourselves ‘that's not what it's really about’. We don't want it to exist, so it doesn't. “It is essential that the members of the community of the Greatest Name take the utmost care not to be drawn into acceptance of such practices because of their prevalence.”^[3]

Violence and abuse does exist. It affects most of us, in some way, every day of our lives. As Bahá'ís we are called on to remove the veils from our eyes. Our Writings are full of the evidence of its existence (if we know where to look). Better yet, the Divine Physician has given us the prescription to heal the wounds and transform our families, our world and ourselves.

Violence and abuse takes many forms: some of which we are familiar with, and others we don't necessarily consider in this category. This article will focus on the various types, from a variety of perspectives, for a variety of audiences. It is hoped that it will contribute in some small way to remove the veils and transform the world.

Incest and Sexual Abuse

“It is difficult to imagine a more reprehensible perversion of human conduct than the sexual abuse of children, which finds its most debased form in incest.”^[4]

How should a parent respond when discovering their child has experienced this form of abuse? “A parent who is aware that the marriage partner is subjecting a child to such sexual abuse should not remain silent, but must take all necessary measures, with the assistance of the Spiritual Assembly or civil authorities if necessary, to bring about an immediate cessation of such grossly immoral behaviour, and to promote healing and therapy.”^[5] If a parent chooses to remain silent, what could be the consequences? “The

parents could be deprived of such parental rights as that of giving consent to marriage. Such questions could arise, for example, when a parent has committed incest, . . . and also when a parent consciously fails to protect the child from flagrant sexual abuse. ^[6]

How should Assemblies behave? “Bahá’í institutions must be uncompromising and vigilant in their commitment to the protection of the children entrusted to their care, and must not allow either threats or appeals to expediency to divert them from their duty.”^[7]

Rape

“One of the most heinous of sexual offenses is the crime of rape.”^[8]

What should the victim do? “She is free to initiate action against the perpetrator under the law of the land should she wish to do so... As to whether she should continue or terminate the pregnancy, it is for her to decide on the course of action she should follow, taking into consideration medical and other relevant factors, and in the light of the Bahá’í Teachings. If she gives birth to a child as a result of the rape, it is left to her discretion whether to see financial support for the maintenance of the child from the father.”^[9]

What if the perpetrator is the husband? “If a Bahá’í woman suffers abuse or is subjected to rape by her husband, she has the right to turn to the Spiritual Assembly for assistance and counsel, or to seek legal protection. Such abuse would gravely jeopardize the continuation of the marriage, and could well lead to a condition of irreconcilable antipathy.”^[10]

How should the community react towards the victim of rape? “When a believer is a victim, she is entitled to the loving aid and support of the members of her community.”^[11]

What is the Assembly’s role? “If she becomes pregnant as a consequence of this assault, no pressure should be brought upon her by the Bahá’í institutions to marry.”^[12]

What are the consequences to the perpetrator? “His claim to any parental rights would, under Bahá’í law, be called into question in view of the circumstances.”^[13] “As to the punishments for such acts as rape, these will be determined in the future by the Universal House of Justice.”^[14]

Sexual Harassment

“We verily, have forbidden you lechery.”^[15] “A chaste and holy life must be made the controlling principle in the behaviour and conduct of all Bahá’ís.”^[16] “...modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations.”^[17] “It condemns infidelity in marital relationships, and all manner of promiscuity, of easy familiarity, and of sexual vices.”^[18]

Pornography and Masturbation

“Masturbation is clearly not a proper use of the sex instinct, as this is understood in the Faith. Moreover, it involves . . . mental fantasies, while Bahá’u’lláh, in the Kitáb-í-Aqdas, has exhorted us not to indulge our passions and in one of His well-known Tablets ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encourages us to keep our ‘secret thoughts pure’”.^[19] “It [a chaste and holy life] demands daily vigilance in the control of one’s carnal desires and corrupt inclinations.”^[20]

What are the consequences? “They that follow their lusts and corrupt inclinations have erred and dissipated their efforts. They, indeed, are of the lost.”^[21]

Domestic Violence

“Violence in the family is antithetical to the spirit of the Faith and a practice to be condemned.”^[22] “No Bahá’í husband should ever beat his wife, or subject her to any form of cruel treatment.”^[23] “For a man to use force to impose his will on a woman is a serious transgression.”^[24]

Lest we be tempted to think that violence is a men’s issue, we have these words from the Universal House of Justice, “Of course, the prohibition against subjecting one’s marriage partner to physical force applies to women as well.”^[25] Women have often been accused of using emotional abuse on men, yet now we know that “Wives should not attempt to dominate their husbands.”^[26]

How are disagreements between couples to be resolved? “There are, therefore, times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other.”^[27] “Family consultation employing full and frank discussion, and animated by awareness of the need for moderation and balance, can be the panacea for domestic conflict.”^[28]

What are the consequences to the perpetrator? “Let those who, driven by their passions or by their inability to exercise discipline in the control of their anger, might be tempted to inflict violence on another human being, be mindful of the condemnation of such disgraceful behaviour by the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh.” [29]

How can we change this behaviour? “Bahá’í men have the opportunity to demonstrate to the world around them a new approach to the relationship between the sexes, where aggression and the use of force are eliminated and replaced by cooperation and consultation.” [30]

How should Assemblies react when made aware of abuse within families? “The National Spiritual Assembly will not tolerate domestic violence and condemns its existence.” [31]

If Assemblies don’t tolerate it, then how should the perpetrator be viewed, with contempt or compassion? “Spiritual Assemblies should be aware that often the perpetrator of domestic violence views himself (or herself) as a person who has a problem which he or she has tried to solve in other ways which have failed, so violence is now being used as a last resort.” [32]

Here is a useful framework that is being used in Australia. “At present the prevailing method, within the Australian community, of treating domestic violence is to advise the couple to separate and to seek treatment from professional counselling services. It is suggested that Assemblies follow this method of treating domestic violence also. If, alternatively, the couple is counselled to remain together to try and reconcile their differences, there can be no guarantee that the violence will not recur, in which case the Assembly could appear, inadvertently, to be condoning it. If the couple separate, however, the role of the Assembly can then become that of providing an independent forum within which the couple can come together and try to resolve their differences.” [33]

Emotional Abuse

In His Tablet of the World, Bahá’u’lláh states that the people of God are forbidden to engage in contention and conflict. [34] How often have we been put down for our ideas? It probably started when we were very young; when we thought the very people would punish us in some way on which our lives depended. That fear has often kept us from expressing our opinions, thereby denying our very existence. “The use of force by the physically strong against the weak, as a means of imposing one’s will and fulfilling one’s desires, is a flagrant transgression of the Bahá’í Teachings. There can be no justification for anyone compelling another, through the use of force or through the threat of violence, to do that to which the other person is not inclined.” [35]

“It [consultation] requires all participants to express their opinions with absolute freedom and without apprehension that they will be censured and/or their views belittled; these prerequisites for success are unattainable if the fear of violence or abuse is present.” [36]

How are we to behave? We “...should exert [our] efforts so that no differences may occur, and if such differences do occur, they should not reach the point of causing conflict, hatred and antagonism, which lead to threats. When you notice that a stage has been reached when enmity and threats are about to occur, you should immediately postpone discussion of the subject, until wranglings, disputations, and loud talk vanish, and a propitious time is at hand.” [37]

Neglect

“Among the safeguards of the Holy Faith is the training of children...[which] is one of the weightiest commandments of God.... Children must be most carefully watched over, protected and trained; in such consisteth true parenthood and parental mercy.” [38] “It is enjoined upon the father and mother, as a duty, to strive with all effort to train the daughter and the son, to nurse them from the breast of knowledge and to rear them in the bosom of sciences and arts.” [39]

What are the consequences for a parent who fails to do so? “Should they neglect this matter, they shall be held responsible and worthy of reproach in the presence of the stern Lord.” [40]

The institutions also have a role to play here. “He that putteth away that which is commanded unto him, the Trustees are then to take from him that which is required for their instruction.” [41]

What of the child who has no parents? “How often in this world do we see a child who has lost his parents and who, unless attention is devoted to his education and training, can produce no fruit. And better off dead than alive is he who produceth no fruit.” [42] Then what is to become of them? “He that bringeth up... the son of another, it is as though he hath brought up a son of Mine; upon him rest My Glory, My Loving-Kindness, My Mercy, that have compassed the world.” [43]

Spanking

How are we to handle the discipline of a child? “While the physical discipline of children is an acceptable part of their education and training, such actions are to be carried out ‘gently and patiently’ and with ‘loving care’, far removed from the anger and violence

with which children are beaten and abused in some parts of the world. To treat children in such an abhorrent manner is a denial of their human rights, and a betrayal of the trust which the weak should have in the strong in a Bahá'í community.”^[44]

“Regarding the prohibition against striking another person, which appears in the Most Holy Book, paragraphs 56 and 148, it would appear from the context that what is primarily intended is the resorting to blows in a situation of conflict, not the limited and measured dispensing of discipline to a child.”^[45]

“Discipline of some sort, whether physical, moral or intellectual, is indeed indispensable, and no training can be said to be complete and fruitful if it disregards this element. ...they [the parents] should endeavour to inculcate, gently and patiently, into their youthful minds such principles of moral conduct and initiate them into the principles and teachings of the Cause with such tactful and loving care as would enable them to become ‘true sons of God’ and develop into loyal and intelligent citizens of His Kingdom.”^[46]

The Writings tell us, “...if the slightest undesirable trait should manifest itself, let her counsel the child and punish him, and use means based on reason, even a slight verbal chastisement should this be necessary.”^[47]

For all too many of us, the use of physical force and shame was our legacy. The result? “...the child’s character will be totally perverted if he be subjected to blows or verbal abuse.”^[48]

How can we overcome this perversion, when we are now the parents, wishing to break the cycle of abuse? “Resolute efforts, including medical ones, as necessary, should be made to curb acts of aggression within families, particularly their extreme forms of wife beating and child abuse by parents.”^[49]

Parents Accused of Perpetrating Acts of Violence and Abuse

With the advent of the proponents of the so-called ‘false memory syndrome’, some parents believe they have been falsely accused by their adult children. How are they to behave? “If the friends and relatives are keeping themselves at a distance from thee, be thou not sad, for God is near to thee. Associate thou, as much as thou canst, with the relatives and strangers; display thou loving kindness; show thou forth the utmost patience and resignation. The more they oppose thee, shower thou upon them the greater justice and equity; the more they show hatred and opposition toward thee, challenge thou them with great truthfulness, friendship and reconciliation.”^[50]

“You must consider your evil-wishers as your well-wishers. Those who are not agreeable toward you must be regarded as those who are congenial and pleasant.”^[51]

“...show to alien souls this same loving kindness ye bestow upon your faithful friends. Should any come to blows with you, seek to be friends with him; should any heap his blame upon you, be ye a healing salve unto his sores; should any taunt and mock at you, meet him with love. Should any heap his blame upon you, praise ye him; should he offer you a deadly poison, give him the choicest honey in exchange; and should he threaten your life, grant him a remedy that will heal him evermore. Should he be pain itself, be ye his medicine.”^[52]

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Conclusion

“As you know, the principle of the oneness of mankind is described in the Bahá’í Writings as the pivot round which all the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh revolve. It has widespread implications which affect and remould all dimensions of human activity. It calls for a fundamental change in the manner in which people relate to each other, and the eradication of those age-old practices which deny the intrinsic human right of every individual to be treated with consideration and respect.” [53]

“The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy.” [54]

Submitted by S.G. – January 2002

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