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The Impact of Racism on Women

Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community to the Forty-fifth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Circulated as UN document # E/CN.6/2001/NGO/7 under item 3b of the provisional agenda: Gender and all forms of discrimination, in particular racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

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The Baha'i International Community is pleased that the Commission on the Status of Women is focusing global attention on the impact of racism on women at its 45th session. Baha'is the world over -- regardless of gender or ethnicity -- have longed for and promoted both the advancement of women and the elimination of all forms of prejudice, including those based on race, ethnicity, and gender.

A world that promotes the equality of women and men will lift much of the burden from women. Likewise a world free of racism will further lighten women's load. But the benefits extend even further. While women are the ones primarily affected when race and gender inequalities coincide, the human race as a whole is disadvantaged and its progress retarded by these injustices. As the Baha'i writings state, "*As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.*"

Women throughout the world find themselves greatly disadvantaged in a socially stratified world by the compounding of discrimination based on race, gender, class, and age. Within what has been termed a "matrix of domination," or "a range of interlocking inequalities" that defines gender, women belonging to an oppressed group feel the effects of these disadvantages most keenly, as they belong simultaneously to two groups that are discriminated against. Racism creates basic social divisions and power structures, and the inequality promoted by racial

divisions is reinforced by structures that also limit opportunities for women. Because of this double jeopardy, women belonging to minority races or ethnic groups often live in virtual invisibility. Neglecting their history and using the media to reinforce gender stereotypes exacerbates the problem.

The disadvantages and injustices suffered by women of oppressed groups living in societies where resources are limited have been highlighted over the past two decades in international fora such as the United Nations. These women endure discrimination in education, particularly where tradition decrees that girl children are not "worth" educating. Their health is jeopardized through poor nutrition, poor reproductive health care, and ineffective protection from unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases—all a result of their social status. The brutal practice of female genital mutilation causes pain and suffering and endangers women's health in the name of "cultural practice," and if the procedure renders them infertile, they are stigmatized as of little value in societies that measure women's worth largely by their ability to produce children. The perilous situation of women in the midst of armed conflict, who are subjected to violence, the trafficking in women and girls for the purposes of prostitution, the exploitation of women laborers—all of these have been documented and examined at length.

Women positioned at the intersection of race and gender are most glaringly affected by the social structures that sustain discrimination and exploitation, but these injustices affect everyone. For example, disadvantages experienced by women oppressed because of race produce unacknowledged benefits for women and men belonging to favored groups. The reluctance to acknowledge these privileges perpetuates injustice and hinders society from developing in healthy ways. When women everywhere, in every culture and society, are welcomed as full partners with men in all fields of endeavor, conditions that promote real justice and peace will prevail.

Since the founding of the United Nations, the Baha'i International Community has spoken many times in international fora about the baneful effects of discrimination, especially racism, and about the need for women's equality. The Baha'i community is dedicated in principle and practice to the abolition of racism and the promotion of the equality of women and men at all levels.

Within the family, Baha'is seek to teach their children the values of oneness, equality and justice. Baha'is value interracial marriage for its positive effect on society and

educate their daughters in the same curricula as their sons. If the family is not able to provide for the education of both, parents are encouraged to give preference to the girls, as they will be the first educators of the next generation.

In local communities, Baha'i institutions are charged with promoting both the equality of women and men and the abolition of racial prejudice. If Baha'i parents are remiss in providing for the education of their daughters, the local Baha'i community must arrange for it. Women are fully eligible to elect and to serve on local and national governing councils. In Baha'i elections, if the vote results in a tie between two people, one of who is a member of a minority group, that person is automatically considered as elected. In Baha'i communities both women and men learn the art of "consultation," or the frank and courteous exchange of views. Social and economic development projects have established schools specifically for girls and training institutes for women that not only teach literacy and practical skills by which they can earn a livelihood but also strengthen moral values and spiritual capacities to assist them to contribute to the advancement of society. Village health care programs promote the well being of women and children in remote areas of the world thereby benefiting the whole society.

In international fora, the Baha'i International Community has long encouraged a fundamental change in beliefs and attitudes about race through education and the promotion of the concept of world citizenship. It has also worked in these fora to advance the status of women.

Baha'is believe that civilization is ever advancing, and the achievement of unity at all levels and in all aspects of life is of paramount importance at this stage in human development. As Baha'u'llah has written, *"The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."*

Baha'is do not regard themselves as experts in this endeavor, but if their more than one hundred and fifty years of experience can be of service to others pursuing this goal, they are happy to offer it for study. It is clear that only when *"[t]he injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all,"* will the human race have addressed the challenges inherent in social structures based on domination, in which injustice is accepted as the natural order of things.