

# **Integration of women in the economic and social development of Latin America and the Caribbean**

by Bahá'í International Community

As is well known, systematic discrimination against women not only made women the main victims of growing poverty, but also led to unhealthy attitudes in men. Due to the fact that women are denied education and technical training, that they are restricted by family work and social structures that favor men and that they are also excluded from the process of decision-making at all levels, she often has to work in the non-formal sector of the economy as a trader and itinerant food vendor, without protection of the legislation and without benefiting from the general improvements in working conditions meanwhile, man develops attitudes of superiority and habits of oppression that leads from the family to the workplace, to political life and, ultimately,

Studies carried out during the United Nations Decade for Women have shown, however, that the integration of women in existing development projects does not necessarily improve their living conditions. If the projects themselves do not take into account the real needs of women, their participation can not be very helpful. Of course, effective solutions to local problems, since they often require resources from governments and external agencies, have to be generated in consultation with those who are expected to serve - men and women. Women, therefore, do not have to be included only as performer and beneficiary of development projects, but also as author and planner.

As true partners, women and men would have to identify the needs of the community together and respond creatively with appropriate solutions. A process of social and economic development would promote not only material well-being but also the spiritual well-being of the community. From the point of view of the Bahá'í International Community, women can contribute to the solution of problems with special qualities, of particular value in economic planning, and even with those qualities that increase their capacities as creators of peace and wisdom. derived from their knowledge of fundamental social issues such as domestic and others. This human approach of greater integration would, of course, take into account the crucial role played by women as mothers, educators, nutritionists,

The importance of education can not be overemphasized. The education of women of all ages is particularly important, because it is one of the most efficient means of spreading the benefit of knowledge at all levels of society, since women are the primary educators of children. Moreover, education raises the status of women, allowing them to participate more in the affairs of the community. Finally, the development of their talents and skills will enable women to contribute their special perception and sensitivity to all spheres of human activities.

The improvement of the condition of women will also require a change in man's attitudes. This change of attitude has to be one of the goals of education. Boys and girls must be brought up with the principle of equality of the sexes, and they have to learn from a very young age to develop their capacities to cooperate. The media can help promote attitudes of equality and present positive role models for both men and women. Popular theater, puppets and other creative strategies can involve the community in open forums in which those attitudes that do not promote the health and well-being of society would be examined and changed.

The Bahá'í International Community believes that the welfare of humanity, the realization of social and

economic development and the establishment of world peace require recognition of the equality of men and women as a spiritual principle and, therefore, of the participation of women with men in all spheres of human activities. Thousands of local Bahá'í communities in Latin America and the Caribbean are involved in this process of integration of men and women in all aspects of community life and in decision-making. We would like to share with you some of the points of our own experience that we find valuable.

In Bahá'í communities, both men and women, as an act of faith, are committed to the implementation of the principle of equality. Both are engaged in developing attitudes appropriate to the status of equality of women. In fact, man, by belonging to a Bahá'í community, is learning from experience that when women are fully integrated into community life, everyone benefits.

Since the beginning of the Bahá'í community, women have been involved in the electoral process of the institutions of that community. The elected local assemblies that guide the affairs of the Bahá'í community have greatly contributed to encouraging women's participation and nurturing respect for diverse points of view. These grassroots organizations involve the community in the identification of their needs, in the elaboration of plans, and in the realization of the same. Among their concerns are the education of children and the implementation of service projects that benefit the entire community. Throughout the world, Bahá'í women are increasingly being elected in these local assemblies, in such a way that they exercise responsibilities as members and thus gain experience in decision-making.

The regular participation of the Bahá'í man and woman in the consultation procedure accustoms them all to solving problems in collaboration. The consultation requires that each person freely give their points of view to the group, in search of a response that provides the welfare of the community as a whole. However, once these points of view have been given, they do not belong more to the person who has given them, but they are considered as belonging to the group. The decision reached by this procedure is also accepted as the product of the group and not of any individual in particular.

One step towards greater participation of women has been the formation of women's advisory groups. In these groups, women, who were often isolated from each other, can share their experiences, practice consultation, encourage themselves and make plans. This experience prepares them for service in the elected local assemblies and encourages them to express their points of view. These groups are also a place for literacy, spiritual and intellectual growth and for the dissemination of information on health, nutrition, child care and other practical information.

The incentive of the community is essential. The plans devised by these advisory groups are submitted to the elected assembly that will consult, approve and make subsequent recommendations to the community that will carry them out. The development of community spirit in support of their initiatives, gives women the necessary courage and creates the moral and psychological environment enabling a dynamic and harmonious change, which is the goal of every Bahá'í development project.

The Bahá'í International Community is pleased to offer these brief comments and suggestions in favor of a framework allowing the full integration of women in all aspects of development and society. We are ready to extend to CEPALC, in the spirit of warm cooperation, the experience and assistance of Bahá'í communities throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to achieve a quality of life for the peoples of that region.